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## Online or In Person, Information-Based or Skills Based, Emerging Trends in Parent Education for Divorcing/Separating Families: What Works?

By Don Gordon, PhD, and Lisa R. Horwitch, PhD, Center for Divorce Education, Ashland, Oregon

In the vast majority of courts across the United States there exists some form of policy for mandating a parent education course for parents who wish to dissolve their marriage and even for those never-married parents who wish to separate, yet remain involved and co-parent their child(ren). One common theme, found among all of these policies, is the agreement that educating parents about the harmful effects that divorce and separation have on children is an important step as parents make these decisions. Providing something that parents can use as a resource to improve their own behavior is also a goal, but one that more often than not falls short. The reason? The most prevalent approach employed for disseminating the numerous topics mandated for such classes is inadequate for actually changing the behavior of these adults who are in the midst of family transition and often in conflict.

It is widely known that three primary approaches to parent education exist: (1) information or lecture-based approach: a teacher stands in front, talks at the audience, disseminates a lot of information with little interaction, other than some possible small group discussions if time permits; (2) affect-based approach: parents hear how the divorce/separation will impact the child through the eyes of the child—they watch videos or listen to children talk about their experience of divorce, separation, or family transition and the impact it has had or is having on them; and (3) skills-based approach: where discrete skills are taught in a systematic manner, providing demonstration, opportunities for practice, and further discussion, allowing for the basis of a new habit to grow. Of these three approaches only one has any evidence of true behavior change in adults. This approach is the skills-based approach.

Forty years of psychosocial behavior research that has tested intervention techniques using skills training, demonstrates that when parents take steps to learn to change specific behaviors of their own, the impact on child problem behavior also shifts and improves. Skills-based training targets a manageable number of discrete skills that parents can immediately digest and use as they begin to shift and develop new habits. In each outcome study reported in the psychosocial behavior literature, a skills-based approach allowed for discrete behavior modification interventions, administering the skill(s) instruction, providing for opportunity to practice, and later for behavior change results to be measured. The literature reveals that such a targeted approach provides individuals with the greatest possibility for behavior change than that of other standard approaches (e.g. information/lecture-based or affect-based approaches).

Understanding that research supports a skills-based approach as being the most effective towards changing behaviors, the Center for Divorce Education (CDE) a non-profit entity, developed its curriculum Children In Between (formerly: Children in the Middle) by first identifying the risk factors known to cause the greatest harm to children of divorce. That greatest risk was being put into loyalty binds with their parents. Taking this one step further, the CDE research team of Gordon and Arbuthnot, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, identified the five most common ways in which parents place their children into loyalty binds with behaviors that cause those children to feel as if they are stuck between two conflicting pieces of themselves, their parents' conflict. From this research, the Children In Between (CIB) curriculum was developed initially as an in-person group course, and tested in the Appalachian area of Ohio. Three goals of this research remained paramount: (1) to examine the ease of use and understandability of the material; (2) to test the skills-based approach itself; and (3) to examine if a limited 3-4 hour skills-based parent education course could have a meaningful and lasting impact on parental behavior change and child adjustment.

On average a typical parent education course attempts to pack as much information as possible into a brief 3-4 hour period. This is a minimal amount of time to attempt to change parents' long entrenched behavior. As such, the teaching techniques in such a brief course must be fairly powerful to have an impact beyond a few days. In CIB, the Behavior Modeling Training method is used; parents watch videos of realistic situations showing common mistakes parents make that expose their children to conflict. They identify with these parents and situations and thus pay close attention as the program, via narrators, directs their attention to the most salient aspects of the videos that would lead to behavior change. Parents then watch the same parents using specific skills (communication, emotional regulation, planning responses) to improve the conflict and spare their children. The narrators focus the viewer's (parents') attention on the skills and how they were helpful. The controlled research conducted on the CIB program demonstrates the benefits of this skills-based class, with most notable behavior changes associated with: (a) improved parental cooperation, (b) improved access to children by the non-residential parent, (c) reduced parent conflict (strongest among those parents who used more of the skills taught within the program), (d) a reduction in litigation, and (e) overall improved child adjustment (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1995; Arbuthnot, Kramer, & Gordon, 1997; Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Arbuthnot, Poole, & Gordon, 1996; Gillard & Seymour, 2005; Brandon, 2004). To date, the CIB in-person curriculum has been widely used by parent education providers across the United States, in all 50 states.

Further support for the skills-based approach with divorced parents can be found in the work from the New Beginnings program out of Arizona State University and the Parenting Through Change program out of the Oregon Social Learning Center. Both are group approaches with 10-14 sessions in which parents are taught skills, with extensive skill practice. Both programs have produced strong positive effects on parent and child behavior that persist over time (Wolchik, Sandler, Weiss, & Winslow, 2007; Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999). Of note, all three programs, New Beginnings, Parenting Through Change, and Children In Between hold the distinction of not only being skills-based but also being included on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, supported by SAMHSA a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

#### **Online or In-Person: Does the class format make a difference?**

Thus far we have discussed the importance of the role that parent education for divorcing families plays towards attempting to shift behavior in parents and facilitate their ability to do the least harm to their children during this difficult family transition time. Providing such skills-based training in an effective format is equally important. Over the past four years, the Center has engaged courts and judges across the country in a dialogue around parent education. Most judges we spoke with, in different parts of the United States, express skepticism about the effectiveness of an online program versus a traditional, in-person, face-to-face class.

Most, but not all, preferred parents attend an in-person class for the following reasons:

- Value the trained professional presenter
- Value the parent's interactions with the presenter and other parents
- Like local provider/presenter
- Believe in the efficacy of a "traditional" approach

Judges who favored an online class cited these reasons:

- Self-pacing
- No need to waive this important requirement
- Multiple language choices
- Available 24/7
- No wait time to take the class
- Potential for processing cases quicker
- Provides parents with a choice

When we look to the research to find answers to the question of online versus in-person, one large meta-analysis, several treatment studies, and research on CIB Online provide some answers.

In 2009, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) conducted a Meta-Analysis of Online Learning Studies. This study was a systematic search of the literature to include studies published between 1996-2008. Over 1,000 empirical studies of online learning were reviewed. The meta-analysis screened each, targeting only those studies that (1) contrasted online with face-to-face; (2) measured student learning outcomes; (3) used a rigorous design in its evaluation; and (4) provided adequate information to calculate effect size.

There were 51 independent effects identified across the studies selected for analysis. Of these, 44 were drawn from research specifically with older learners (adults pursuing undergraduate or graduate level studies). In addition, the USDOE study revealed that students who took all or part of their coursework in an online setting performed better, on average, than those students taking the same course through a traditional face-to-face approach. Another important point worth mentioning is that instruction that combined online and face-to-face elements appeared to provide greater advantages for students than those with a purely face-to-face or online instruction. A rationale for this last finding may be due to the fact that much of the instruction being delivered uses an “information-based” approach and not a targeted skills-based approach.

Finally, a narrative review of the experimental and quasi-experimental studies that contrasted online and face-to-face delivery suggests that online learning can be enhanced by giving learners control of their interactions with media and prompting learner reflection (e.g. triggering learner activity/reflection). This seems to support the notion that providing interaction, a skills-based approach with practice exercises and further opportunities for participants to engage with the curriculum, will provide greater and longer term results than what is typically found in a strictly information driven approach.

The importance of the USDOE study speaks to the usefulness and trend we are seeing in the online parent education community for divorce/separating parents. That trend is ever increasing towards courts providing alternative resources in online settings. With budget cuts occurring in courts across this country, more and more courts are looking to put in place quality alternatives, from which families can choose, to meet the mandates.

Looking at other studies of online interventions, most support the feasibility and effectiveness of online programs, including those targeting smoking cessation, teen health behaviors, body image, headaches, panic, posttraumatic stress, weight loss, and pediatric encopresis (Ritterbrand, et. al., 2003). A study examining eating disorder treatment using an online approach was preferred over in-person and was found to be as effective (Celio et al, 2000).

In 2008, the Center took the next step to transform its already proven skills-based Children In Between curriculum into an interactive skills-based online format. Continuing to use proven psychosocial behavior modification interventions, the online class was designed to ensure parental interaction where parents are continually making choices (involving the cerebral cortex). Throughout the online course parents get feedback on those choices, and this feedback comes at a far greater rate than is possible in a parent education “in-person” or group setting. Further, guided questions are also included to direct the parents’ attention to skills and their acquisition. The USDOE study suggests that providing parents the opportunity to reflect while learning and triggering practice supports the existing literature on developing new habits and impacting behavior change. To accommodate the additional information provided to most parents in a face-to-face, information-based approach, the CIB Online course places this information in a booklet that a parent studies. The parent is then required to take and pass a test on the content in order to receive a certificate of completion. The purpose of this final piece is to keep the bulk of the class focused on skill development, while still allowing for parents to learn more about topics such as: (a) the harmful ways in which their adult conflict can impact their children; (b) what to do in cases of domestic violence; (c) understanding the developmental stages of their children; and much more. A second booklet supplied to parents provides additional skill practice exercises so they can continue practicing during or after completing the course.

Several experimental and quasi-experimental studies of CIB Online have been conducted. In Ireland, a doctoral student conducted a treatment and control group comparison for CIB Online. The small sample (n=16) of online and controls prevented quantitative analyses other than inspecting means. Those means trends were supported by parent comments in the qualitative analyses included: parents reported increased confidence in their parenting and improved parenting, such as taking the time to listen to their children, cuddle with them, and having more patience. They used skills taught in the program to improve the co-parent relationship. Parents reported using self-talk, considering the other person’s perspective and managing their own emotions. The qualitative analyses showed improvements in parental self-efficacy and children’s adjustment corresponding to the means, which did not change for the control participants.

In 2011 and 2012, an urban court in the Pacific Northwest of the United States agreed to embark on a study that would examine (1) the model of parent education and whether or not this made a difference between an information-based class and skills-based class; and whether the delivery method (online or face-to-face) made a difference; and (2) parents’ intention for behavior change after taking the course.

This particular urban county offers a face-to face information-based course, which the court developed and used for over a decade. The class leaders are highly skilled, experienced and enthusiastic in their delivery. These leaders were trained to also deliver the face-to-face CIB program so differences in outcomes due to presenter differences could be accounted for.

Each participant completed a pre-test questionnaire along with a six-month follow-up. The total number of participants was 223, with approximately 75 from each treatment group. While the researchers had hoped for a larger sample size, participation return rates for the six-month follow-up were only 30-32%.

Preliminary results reveal that by simply combining all survey questions together and looking across the three groups, there appears to be no statistically significant results. However, if we begin to look at the results item by item and compare the responses across all three treatment groups, we see effect sizes that range from the small (0.2), medium (0.5) to large (0.8+). Most of the effect size differences favored the online group in areas such as: (a) kids being easier to handle after a visit, (b) kids seeing parents argue less at drop-off, (c) kids not hearing a parent badmouth the co-parent, and (d) child support payments being less of a problem. One question showed greater improvement for the information-based/group class than the online course—parents complaining less to the kids about money issues.

Another study examining the impact of online versus in-person, funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, was conducted through courts in Michigan and Oregon. Parents were randomly assigned to the CIB group class (n=84) or the CIB online course (n=66). Only 30% complied with the court’s mandate to attend. Return rates for the pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up surveys ranged from 27-75%, so findings must be considered suggestive rather than conclusive. Focus groups allowed for qualitative data analyses. Changes from pretest to follow-up were in the expected directions for both online and group with few differences between them. Effect sizes were moderate to large, showing robust treatment effects for both online and in-class (group) conditions. Parent satisfaction was equally high and reports of decreased parental conflict were the same for both conditions. The majority of parents avoided putting their kids in the middle of their conflict at follow-up for both conditions, and also encouraged the co-parent to see the children. The only group difference was that, in the online group, parents encouraged the children to see the co-parent more than the group condition. For Spanish-speaking parents, the pre-test to follow-up changes were large (effect sizes 2.2 to 4.9), showing very substantial improvements for the online condition.

Finally, in a recent review of over 1,500 exit surveys completed by parents from a large urban center in the United States who took the CIB Online course, 86% of parents made mention of specific skills they will use to improve communication and emotional control. Another 78% mention learning new information about the effects of conflict on their child(ren). These are typically items the parent had not considered prior to taking the course. Table 1 provides an additional sampling of some of the open-ended responses parents provided when they mention their intent to take the skills learned and put them into action.

Table 1: Sample open-ended result to question: What were the most interesting or important things you learned in the seminar/course?

How the situations are portrayed in a good and bad way of handling different situations so I can have an outside view of the effect on the children. It’s good to see it like this so I will be more likely to stop/look/listen if a situation ever comes up.	Learning how to rephrase my opinion so that it is not threatening to my kids father.
How not to involve the children in personal situations between parents when disagreements occur.	How important it is to use “I message” more often than “you messages.”
The importance of remaining calm when speaking with the other parent. Taking time to see how my daughter is feeling about the changes going on around her, and how these changes are affecting her.	The skills to communicate effectively with the other parent especially in tense moments and how this affects the children and their behavior and perception of us.
I learned to use "I" messages and request things politely. I really think these will help me in my communication with my ex-husband. I also like the self-talk, breathing with the stop look and listen method! I also love that you pointed out the effects this will have on the children. Making sure to speak with them about what is going on and letting them know it is okay to express themselves.	

In summary, the evidence that online interventions in general are at least as effective as in-person, is consistent. In the divorce education area, the only research available that truly examines this question (online versus in-person) is that conducted on the CIB program. The skills-based group and online program appear equally effective, with no striking advantages for either. More research with larger samples and better return rates for follow-up surveys will reveal if these preliminary findings hold up.

**Trends for Court Selection of Online Programs—Model Processes.**

More and more courts are moving to include some type of online resource among the options they provide parents for parent education. The Center is pleased to have noted that in the past four years there has been a shift in how courts are selecting programs. This trend reveals the following when courts review potential online programs for approval:

<p>Look For Evidence-Based:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Trend towards research that shows evidence of impact and effectiveness</li> <li>(2) Reduction of stress; high conflict</li> <li>(3) Tested in real court situations</li> </ul>	<p>Content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant</li> <li>• Skills-based</li> <li>• Actionable (takeaways)</li> <li>• Child-centered</li> <li>• Developmental stages</li> <li>• Impact on children</li> <li>• More...</li> </ul>
<p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost; language;</li> <li>• Experience working with courts;</li> <li>• Fit with county and state policy requirements</li> </ul>	<p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of RFP process</li> <li>• Meet with potential providers for direct Q&amp;A</li> <li>• Good fit with existing in-person offerings</li> </ul>

The Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit entity established in 1987. The mission of CDE is to advocate for children and help parents minimize the harmful effects divorce has on children. Since 1987, CDE has been conducting research and identifying the most effective strategies that are proven to help parents reduce their conflict while maintaining focus on achieving their parental responsibilities. We are pleased and honored to work with courts in all 50 states and serve as a resource to help educate on the effects of divorce and parenting plans on the emotional and social development of children. To find more information about the Center visit: <http://divorce-education.com> or email Don Gordon, PhD at [Gordon@mind.net](mailto:Gordon@mind.net).

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