

DOES MANDATORY DIVORCE EDUCATION FOR PARENTS WORK?

A Six-Month Outcome Evaluation

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In a court-mandated, child-focused class for divorcing parents, parental mastery of skills taught were evaluated both immediately after the class and 6 months later. Parents perceived the classes to be realistic and useful. Skills were effectively learned and were maintained over the evaluation period. Parents reported that they were successful in dramatically lowering exposure of their children to parental conflict. Relative to a comparison group of parents divorcing the year before the classes were initiated, parents completing the class were better able to work through how they would handle difficult child-related situations with their ex-spouses and were willing to let their children spend more time with the other parent. Few gender differences were observed—mothers perceived the class as more realistic; fathers showed greater improvement on some skills. Similarly, interest level in further training was not predictive of class benefits, suggesting that enthusiasm for parenting training is probably not essential.

Excellent program! Opened my eyes to my kids' point of view and the importance of joint efforts for my kids' benefit.

I feel like the information and video I saw today will help me in the future to make better decisions for my daughter.

I think offering this program really makes parents think about the effect—too bad it comes after the damage is done in the marriage.

I think this approach is very helpful in making parents aware of what is going on with the children that normally the parents do not recognize because of their own depression and grief from the divorce.

I wish I had had a program like this a year ago. Maybe I wouldn't be so full of anger.

Made me understand how important it is to try to get along with my child's father.

Makes you aware of things that can and will come up and how to deal with them without emotionally upsetting the children.

We were "persuaded" to put aside everything we are going through right now to take time out to think about our children—how they feel, how this affects them, and what we can do to help them through this with as little conflict or problems/anxiety as possible.

These are typical participant responses following a 2-hour court-mandated education program for divorcing parents called *Children in the Middle*. Although parent education programs are not new in our society, classes tailored to the specific needs of divorcing families are a relatively recent phenomenon. Fifteen years ago, there was perhaps one. Five years ago, they numbered in the dozens. Now there are hundreds. The first international congress devoted specifically to divorce education programs, sponsored by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts in Chicago in the fall of 1994, drew 400 participants. Clearly, this is a phenomenon that is experiencing a rapid growth rate in response to the heightened awareness among the judicial and mental health professionals, as well as the general public, of the personal and societal costs of divorce on parents and children alike.

The motivation behind such programs would appear to be well founded and sincere. Many children have a difficult time adapting to parental divorce, as do many parents. And many parents may wittingly or unwittingly involve their children in their ongoing conflicts and unresolved marital issues with their ex-spouses. But in spite of good intentions, do these programs work? Are they successful in sensitizing parents to their children's burdens and dilemmas? Do these motivations lead to behavior change? Do parents learn new skills and adaptive behaviors? Do they appropriately use their newly acquired sensitivities and skills? Do they reduce conflict?

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Every other marriage begun today will end in divorce. Approximately 60% of current divorces involve children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992), with a total of nearly 1.5 million children experiencing the divorce of their parents each year. It is further projected that of all children born today, between 60% and 65% will spend at least a portion of their childhood in a single-parent household.

Recent reviews paint a fairly dismal picture of the experience of many children of families of high conflict and/or divorce (e.g., Emery, 1994; Kelly, 1993). Common effects include both externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggressive, impulsive, and antisocial behaviors) and internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, depression, and withdrawal). Most studies indicate that the proximal causes of children's difficulties surrounding the divorce experience include parental conflict, loyalty pressure, quality of parenting, adjustment of the residential parent, access and closeness of the nonresidential parent, type of residential parenting plan, and form of dispute resolution (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1994b; Emery, 1994; Kelly, 1993).

INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Most divorcing parents seek no particular outside assistance for their children. Although individual psychotherapy or counseling is an available option for some families, such therapy or counseling, however, is not a plausible intervention for the majority of children of divorce. First, individual therapy is costly, often making it inaccessible to lower income families or families without insurance. Second, parents in the midst of divorce often fail to notice their children's difficulties (Young, 1983) and therefore typically do not seek assistance. Third, even when assistance is offered, parents who believe their children are coping may be reluctant to involve them in therapy (Felner, Norton, Cowen, & Farber, 1981). Fourth, the median number of visits to individual therapists is only one (Robinson, 1990), making it highly unlikely that an adequate "dose" will be received. Finally, individual therapy cannot deal with systemic problems in the home or school, or the ongoing conflicts between parents.

Passive educational interventions with divorcing parents have met with some success. Ogles, Lambeth, and Craig (1991) distributed randomly one of four books about coping with loss to 64 adults who had experienced divorce or breakup. One of the books was behaviorally oriented and described strategies for coping with loss-specific symptoms and beginning new relationships, two were based on stage theories of divorce adjustment and included information regarding the adjustment process, and the fourth focused on coping with general life crises and loss. In a comparison of pretest and posttest scores, participants reported significant decreases of psychiatric depressive and loss-specific symptoms. Improvements did not differ significantly by book.

Kurkowski, Gordon, and Arbuthnot (1993) gave divorced parents a list of situations in which children in their community reported that they felt caught in the middle of their parents' conflicts, along with instructions on how to monitor and minimize these situations. Relative to randomly assigned control group parents not getting such printed instructions, adolescents in the treatment group reported improvements in their parents' behaviors 1 month postintervention.

Arbuthnot, Poole, and Gordon (in press) distributed the 32-page booklet *What About the Children: A Guide for Divorced and Divorcing Parents* (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1991b) to every second set of parents filing for divorce in one large urban domestic relations court over a 12-week period. Three-month follow-up interviews showed that mothers in the intervention group reported greater reduction of loyalty conflict behaviors and increased encour-

agement of child-father involvement. No differences were observed between intervention and control groups for either mothers' willingness to share responsibility or in talking to their children about interparental conflict and personal distress. No differences were observed for father behaviors. Children exhibiting greater internalizing and externalizing behaviors on the Child Behavior Checklist (Parents) had mothers who reported experiencing greater interpersonal conflict and personal distress, and more often spoke of their difficulties to their children.

There are several limitations to passive interventions for divorcing parents. First, although some parents may be highly motivated to learn about the potential effects of their divorce on their children and how to minimize these effects, it is likely that most are not so motivated and may believe that their children are coping well. Second, there is no way to guarantee that parents actually read the materials they receive. Third, there may be no provision for practice of skills, or feedback about how well skills are learned and used. Fourth, there is no way to assure that both parents avail themselves of the material. And fifth, some parents have reading and/or language difficulties.

Most, if not all, of these difficulties can be removed by mandatory attendance at a video-based, skills-oriented parent education class. Video-based parent education classes increase attentiveness and motivation, minimize problems associated with reading levels, and provide concrete demonstrations of skills (Arbuthnot & Harter, 1994). Further, because simple emotionally laden motivation (typically induced by watching several scenes of children describing their reactions to their parents' divorce) rarely leads to behavior change in the absence of training in new behaviors (O'Leary & Wilson, 1975), classes need to be skills oriented. Attendance at classes should be mandated by the local court, because attendance at voluntary programs is negligible and is likely to include those parents who least need the training (Arbuthnot, Segal, Gordon, & Schneider, 1994).

THE PRESENT STUDY

This article is the third in a series of studies designed to evaluate the effectiveness of divorce education interventions for parents (see Arbuthnot et al., in press; Kurkowski et al., 1993). The specific goals of the present study were to assess (a) parental reactions to the content and format of mandatory parent education programs, (b) whether divorcing parents can learn communication skills and parenting behaviors that would minimize the problems associated with children being caught in the middle of postdivorce parental disputes and difficulties, (c) whether the skills that parents learn are main-

tained over time, and (d) whether parents completing a program will act to reduce interparental conflict and increase measurable aspects of postdivorce parenting quality.

METHOD

RESEARCH SITE

The research was conducted in Athens County, located in the Appalachian portion of southeastern Ohio. The parent program is operated by the Court of Common Pleas, located in the county seat of Athens, population 20,000. Although the city of Athens is the home of Ohio University and is relatively affluent, the surrounding county is rural and relatively poor, having the highest percentage of families below the poverty line in the state. The parent program is mandated by the court for anyone filing for divorce or postdivorce litigation in which children are involved.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 131 parents participated in the parent education class during the time period of the research project. The class sizes ranged from 3 to 22, with a mean size of 9.1 and a median and mode of 8. All 131 filled out brief postclass evaluations for the court. Data from these 131 parents were used for portions of this research. In addition, 89 parents (67.9%) agreed to participate in the research program. The parents in the sample were 53% female, predominantly Caucasian, with an average of 1.8 children ($SD = 0.4$), an average age of 33.3 years ($SD = 4.8$), an average of 12.8 years of schooling ($SD = 2.0$), and had been separated an average of 14.9 months ($SD = 2.6$) at the time of the class and 21.5 months ($SD = 2.7$) at the time of the follow-up. The social class level of the sample averaged 3.3 ($SD = 1.3$) on Hollingshead's 7-point scale. Hollingshead's scale ranges from 1 (unskilled workers) to 7 (physicians, lawyers, CEOs etc.). Level 3 includes skilled workers, for example, equipment operators, carpenters, secretaries, and bank tellers.

No differences were found on the demographic variables between the 89 parents who agreed to participate in the research project and the remaining 42 who chose not to participate. It should be noted that although long-term follow-up data were not available for the 42 nonresearch parents, they did fill out the pre- and postclass surveys for the court, and these data were available for the research project.

A comparison group of 23 parents who filed for divorce in the year prior to the institution of the education program did not differ significantly from the treatment group on demographic or family variables.

PROCEDURE

Parents of minor children filing for divorce or legal separation, or filing for postdecree action, were given notice that attendance at a 2-hour parent education class was mandatory, and completion of the class was necessary for a hearing to be scheduled. (Parents are generally excused from such classes if they reside out of state or can otherwise demonstrate hardship.)

Two classes were offered per month, one scheduled on a weekend and the other on a weekday evening. Classes were held at the county protective (children's) service agency facility. Parents were expected to make their own appointments. The program was free of charge.

At the end of the 2-hour class, all parents were given a postclass evaluation survey to complete. This survey asked a number of demographic and consumer satisfaction questions about the class, and also included problem-situation questions to assess mastery of the course skills, as well as a few items regarding perceptions of how well the children were coping with the divorce, and current and projected parental conflict levels.

At this time, the parents were asked if they would be interested in participating in a research project on divorce education. They were informed that participation would be strictly voluntary and confidential, that no responses would be reported to either the court or to the attorneys for either party in their dispute, and that they would be contacted in several months for a follow-up telephone interview. If they completed the follow-up interview, participants would be paid \$10.

Approximately 6 months after participating in the class, participants were called for a telephone interview. A total of 48 (53.9%) of the original 89 parents who agreed to be in the research project were reached. The remainder could not be located ($n = 26$), failed to respond to repeated calls ($n = 12$), or declined to participate ($n = 3$). No demographic differences were observed between the parents retained or lost from the postclass survey to the 6-month follow-up.

CONTENT OF THE PROGRAM

The program focused largely on the needs of children in divorcing families and on the parenting skills necessary to meet their needs and minimize the

stresses associated with being caught in the middle of parental difficulties. The class was built around a central video (*Children in the Middle*¹), which illustrates the most common ways in which children are put in the middle of parental conflicts over communication, money, loyalty issues, and information gathering.

The version of *Children in the Middle* used in this study was a half-hour video that used scripted scenarios to illustrate both a dysfunctional and a functional version of interactions of parents and children in the four situations that children of divorce have reported to be both most common and most stressful for them (Gordon & Arbuthnot, 1988). The scenes were acted by nonprofessionals who were, with one exception, actual parents and children of divorce who had experienced these types of situations. The four problem situations were (a) using children to carry stressful messages between angry parents, (b) exposing children to hostile statements and put-downs of their other parent, (c) involving children in divorce-related money problems between the parents, and (d) quizzing children about private and personal aspects of the other parent's life.

The video was narrated by a female domestic relations judge and included commentary and interpretation of the scenes by child-clinical and developmental psychologists. The goals of the video were both to sensitize parents to their stress-inducing behaviors, with clear illustrations of the effects on the children, and to train them in communication skills (e.g., keeping children out of parental problems and discussions, using "I" messages, dealing with one specific problem at a time, staying on the topic) that would enable replacement of the stress-inducing behaviors with cooperative ones.

The class was both didactic and experiential. They began with introductory comments about the scope of the problem of divorce in American society and an overview of its potential effects on children (from a developmental perspective). This part of the class was intended to both normalize and personalize the divorce experience for the parents. The four topics in the video were then shown, one at a time, and discussed.

The discussion groups were led by individuals who had extensive experience working with families. The groups were led by a male-female team, both of whom were social workers employed by the county children's service agency. They both had had extensive experience in adult education and received approximately 2 hours of training with the developers of the *Children in the Middle* program in the goals of the program, blending the didactic and experiential components, and dealing with emotionally upset and potentially angry divorcing parents.

Both discussion group leaders were given the 12-page *Children in the Middle: Discussion Leader's Guide* (2nd edition, Arbuthnot & Gordon,

1991a; now in 3rd edition, Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1995), which provides overviews of the goals of each segment of the program and includes suggestions for discussion techniques, a handout for teaching "I" messages, and other activities.

In addition, the parents were given the 32-page booklet *What About the Children: A Guide for Divorced and Divorcing Parents* (2nd edition, Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1991b). This guide includes 12 sections on dealing with common problems in divorce, including the potential harmful effects of divorce on children (by age and gender, written from a developmental psychology perspective), with specific suggestions for what parents should do to ease children's transition to postdivorce family life. Other topics include the need for access to two loving and competent parents, single parenting, dealing with new partners, dealing with the legal system, types of parenting plans, how courts decide on parenting plans, using mediation, keeping other relatives involved, and a resource guide of publications for both parents and children.

The parents were also given the 17-page booklet *Children in the Middle: Parents' and Children's Guidebook* (2nd edition, Gordon & Arbuthnot, 1991; now in 3rd edition, 1994). This guide is specifically designed to accompany the *Children in the Middle* video and provides summaries of the scenes and topics, along with four additional scenarios depicting additional problems encountered by children of divorce, as well as exercises for both parents and children.

Of course, there is no way to assure that parents used either of the booklets after participating in the class. The goals of giving parents the booklets were (a) to provide them with resource materials they can turn to later when issues arise in their family life and they need to refresh their memories of the nature of the problems and what they might do to address them, and (b) to prompt them to coach their children in ways in which the children could signal parents that they are feeling caught in the middle. Earlier research (Arbuthnot et al., in press) involving parents who did not attend a parenting class but were merely given *What About the Children* suggests that most parents read at least some of the material and that doing so is beneficial.

RESULTS

The results of the study fall into three main subsets (the reactions of parents to the class, the maintenance of changes within the treatment group over time, and the similarities and differences between the treatment and

comparison groups at the 6-month follow-up), and two secondary subsets (differences by gender and as a function of interest in further training).

REACTIONS OF PARENTS TO THE CLASS

The first set of analyses pertain to the parents' reactions to the class itself.

Class evaluations. The evaluations of the class experience by the 131 participating parents were favorable. On 5-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *somewhat*, 3 = *moderately*, 4 = *very*, and 5 = *extremely*), the parents rated the four problem scenes in the video as 3.7 on *realism*, 3.0 on *relevance* to their own life and experiences, 3.5 on *usefulness of the information in the video* in helping reduce divorce-related stress on their children, and 3.6 on *usefulness of the discussions* in learning skills to use in the future to help their children deal with the divorce.

Awareness of child's perspective. Parents were asked to rate their awareness both prior to and after the class of their children's point of view regarding their feelings about their other parent and the relationship between the parents. On a 5-point scale, the preclass awareness was 3.4 (between *moderately* and *very*), and the postclass awareness was 3.8 ($t = 2.08$, $df = 128$, $p < .05$; two-tailed tests are used throughout; refer to Table 1 for an overview of outcomes).

Exposure to conflict. Parents were asked to rate retrospectively the amount of conflict their children had been exposed to during the 3 months prior to the class, as well as to predict the amount of conflict they would be exposed to during the next 3 months. On a 5-point scale, the preclass conflict exposure level was 2.67 (between *a little* and *a fair amount*), whereas the anticipated postclass conflict exposure level was 1.80 (between *none* and *a little*). These ratings differed significantly ($t = 4.25$, $df = 97$, $p < .0001$). Further, this projected decrease was reportedly achieved over the 6-month follow-up period (postclass = 1.80 vs. follow-up = 1.76; $t = 0.20$, $df = 95$, n.s.).

MAINTENANCE OF CHANGES WITHIN THE TREATMENT GROUP OVER TIME

The second group of analyses assessed the extent to which skills learned by parents in the class were maintained over a 6-month period of time. The desired results would be no loss of skills and possible improvement (due to the positive reinforcements of improved interactions with children and other parents).

Table 1
Treatment Versus Comparison Group Means

	Treatment	Comparison	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Sensitivity items					
Aware of child's views	3.25	3.83	2.03	69	< .05
Child time with other parent	160.00	94.20	2.95	65	< .005
Skills training items					
What would parent <i>say</i> (total)	3.29	3.11	1.07	152	
What would parent <i>do</i> (total)	3.80	3.18	3.34	152	< .001
CIM: ^a Messages	1.06	2.87	2.56	68	< .01
CIM: Put-downs	1.73	3.23	2.84	68	< .01
CIM: Money	1.31	2.94	2.04	68	< .05
CIM: Quizzing	1.66	3.08	2.64	68	< .01
Self-reported behaviors					
Encourage time with other parent	22.2	20.6	0.21	62	
Other parent cares	15.1	19.6	0.68	67	
Parent feels angry, etc.	2.96	3.57	2.06	69	< .05
Talk to child about parent's feelings	1.62	1.83	1.12	68	
Talk to child about divorce	2.15	2.17	0.10	68	
Arguments with other parent	25.4	32.5	0.77	67	
Child adjustment					
Child's maturity about divorce	3.67	3.74	1.44	67	
Adjustment regarding other children of divorce	3.94	3.87	0.28	69	
Adjustment regarding other children	3.19	3.26	0.28	69	
Child receiving therapy	1.73	1.69	0.66	69	
Child would benefit from therapy	1.40	1.57	1.00	68	
Parent sought therapy about child	1.79	1.74	0.49	69	
School absences	2.07	6.79	4.23	62	< .001
Visits to physician	1.43	3.13	2.02	67	< .05

a. CIM = Children in the Middle.

The treatment group showed no loss of skills from postclass to 6-month follow-up on the total scores of either what they would *say* in response to the three open-ended stressful situations ($T2 = 3.34$, $T3 = 3.26$; $t = 0.71$, $df = 128$, n.s.), or in what they would *do* ($T2 = 3.75$, $T3 = 3.82$; $t = 0.20$, $df = 128$, n.s.). Higher scores indicated greater ability to respond constructively to the other parent. For example, in response to "What would you say?" a response in which the parent expresses anger about his or her "ex" to the child or uses a put-down would be scored as a 1. A response in which both of these are absent and the parent provides a sensitive explanation (e.g., "sometimes plans change without much advance warning"), or engages the child in a discussion to elicit the child's feelings would be scored as a 5.

In addition, the treatment group showed maintenance of skills on the average score of the combined four situations that assessed the frequency with which parents put children in the middle of parental conflicts and problems ($T_2 = 1.31$, $T_3 = 1.39$; $t = 0.28$, $df = 128$, n.s.; scores ranged from 1 = *never* to 5 = *every day*).

TREATMENT VERSUS COMPARISON GROUP

The final group of analyses examines the responses of the parents who participated in the class (assessed approximately 6 months after completion) with the comparison group of parents who divorced during the year prior to the institution of the class.

Sensitivity to Children's Needs

Awareness of child's views. Treatment parents rated their awareness of the child's views about the divorce significantly lower than did the comparison group parents, (treatment group (T) = 3.25, comparison group (C) = 3.83; $t = 2.03$, $df = 69$, $p < .05$).

Child's time with other parent. Parents were asked to indicate how many days in the next year that they would be willing to have the child spend with the other parent. Parents in the treatment group indicated nearly 80% more days than those in the comparison group ($T = 160.0$, $C = 94.2$; $t = 2.95$, $df = 65$, $p < .005$).

Effectiveness of Skills Training

To assess the effectiveness of the program in teaching skills, parents' follow-up responses to the three potentially conflict-inducing situations were contrasted with those of parents in the comparison group. It was expected that the treatment group would (a) show greater sensitivity to their children's potential or actual difficulties and to the situations that increase their children's stress, and (b) demonstrate more adequate skills for dealing with problems associated with children being caught in the middle of parental conflicts and problems.

Following each scenario, the parents were asked in open-ended questions what they would (a) say and (b) do in response. A sample item is presented below:

Your child returns from seeing your ex-spouse. He/she is dirty, hasn't bathed in at least a day, is tired, and is in an irritable mood (especially when you ask him/her to do any chores). When you ask your child where he/she went, he/she lets you know that he/she has spent most of the time at the residence of your ex-spouse's new lover. [Pronouns were matched to the gender of the target child.]

What would you say to your child?

What would you do?

Responses were coded by a trained research assistant who had no knowledge of either the goals of the study or of the group assignment of the parents. Interrater reliability with the senior author on a subset of respondents was .94 ($p < .001$). Scores ranged along a 5-point continuum of awareness of the need to keep children out of parental conflicts, and/or ability to respond to the other parent in a constructive and nonthreatening fashion. Scores were averaged across the three problem situations for both the *say* and *do* responses.

The treatment and comparison groups did not differ on *say* responses ($T = 3.29$, $C = 3.11$, $t = 1.07$, $df = 152$, n.s.). However, the treatment group scored significantly higher on *do* responses ($T = 3.80$, $C = 3.18$; $t = 3.34$, $df = 152$, $p < .001$).

Putting Children in the Middle

Parents were given a series of four brief scenarios designed to assess the frequency with which the parent put his or her child in the middle of a parental conflict situation. The four topics included using the child to send messages, put-downs of the other parent, money problems, and using the child as a "spy." These scenarios paralleled those shown for instructional purposes in the *Children in the Middle* video. A sample item is presented below:

Situation B: One parent asks a child about the other parent to find out what the other parent is doing. For example, one parent asks about how the other one spends his or her money, who he or she spends time with, what he or she does when the first parent isn't around, and so forth. Usually these questions are about personal or private things.

In the past three months, how often have you asked [your child] such questions about your "ex"? (Answer format: 5 = *every day*, 4 = *every few days*, 3 = *once a week*, 2 = *once a month*, or 1 = *never*.)

The treatment group scored significantly lower than the comparison group in frequency of all four situations: messages ($T = 1.06$, $C = 2.87$; $t = 2.56$, $df = 68$, $p < .01$), put-downs ($T = 1.73$, $C = 3.23$; $t = 2.84$, $df = 68$, $p < .01$),

money issues ($T = 1.31$, $C = 2.94$; $t = 2.04$, $df = 68$, $p < .05$), and quizzing ($T = 1.66$, $C = 3.08$; $t = 2.64$, $df = 68$, $p < .01$).

Self-Reported Behaviors

Support of child's relationship with other parent. The two groups were equivalent. There were no differences in how many times in the past 3 months they had encouraged the child to spend more time with the other parent ($T = 22.2$, $C = 20.6$; $t = 0.21$, $df = 62$, n.s.), and how often they had told the child that the other parent cares about them ($T = 15.1$, $C = 19.6$; $t = 0.68$, $df = 67$, n.s.).

Discussion of divorce-related issues with child. Parents in the treatment group reported significantly fewer incidents over the prior 3 months of feeling angry, depressed, or upset because of the other parent ($T = 2.96$, $C = 3.57$; $t = 2.06$, $df = 69$, $p < .05$). However, both groups reported equivalent frequencies of talking to the child about these feelings ($T = 1.62$, $C = 1.83$; $t = 1.12$, $df = 68$, n.s.). Neither did the two groups differ in how frequently they talked with the child about the divorce or the current situation with the other parent ($T = 2.15$, $C = 2.17$; $t = 0.10$, $df = 68$, n.s.).

Parental conflict. Parents in the treatment group and comparison groups reported equivalent percentages of conversations with their ex-spouses in the past 3 months that had ended in arguments (25.4% vs. 32.5%; $t = 0.77$, $df = 67$, n.s.).

Child's Adjustment

Treatment and comparison group parents rated their children equivalent in the level of their maturity in response to the divorce ($T = 3.67$, $C = 3.74$; $t = 1.44$; $df = 67$, n.s.). The two groups did not differ in ratings of the child's adjustment to the divorce compared to other children of divorce ($T = 3.94$, $C = 3.87$; $t = 0.28$, $df = 69$, n.s.), or in ratings of the child's adjustment compared to other children who were not dealing with a divorce ($T = 3.19$, $C = 3.26$; $t = 0.28$, $df = 69$, n.s.).

The two groups did not differ in whether the child was receiving therapy ($T = 1.73$, $C = 1.69$, 2-point scale; $t = 0.66$, $df = 69$, n.s.), whether the parent thought the child would benefit from therapy ($T = 1.40$, $C = 1.57$, 2-point scale; $t = 1.00$, $df = 68$, n.s.), or whether the parent had sought therapy him- or herself regarding the child's adjustment ($T = 1.79$, $C = 1.74$, 2-point scale; $t = 0.49$, $df = 69$, n.s.).

The treatment group parents did report that the child had experienced significantly fewer days absent from school in the prior 3 months than did comparison group parents ($T = 2.07$, $C = 6.79$; $t = 4.23$, $df = 62$, $p < .001$). In addition, the treatment group children had fewer visits to physicians during the prior 3 months ($T = 1.43$, $C = 3.13$; $t = 2.02$, $df = 67$, $p < .05$).

SUBSIDIARY ANALYSES BY GENDER

Relatively few differences were found as a function of gender of the parents. See Table 2 for a summary of the significant items.

Females rated the program higher on realism ($F = 3.85$, $M = 3.47$; $t = 2.21$, $df = 124$, $p < .05$). Males scored higher in what they would say in the stressful situations items ($F = 3.19$, $M = 3.58$; $t = 2.01$, $df = 1246$, $p < .05$). Males were willing to allow their children to spend more days per year with their other parent ($F = 155.98$ days, $M = 186.59$ days; $t = 2.04$, $df = 42$, $p < .05$), whereas females were more likely to have encouraged the child within the past 3 months to spend time with the other parent ($F = 34.13$, $M = 5.17$; $t = 3.42$, $df = 136$, $p < .001$). Both of these latter outcomes no doubt reflect the realities of parenting plans. Finally, males were more likely to believe that their children would benefit from having therapy ($F = 1.23$, $M = 1.68$; $t = 2.23$, $df = 47$, $p < .05$), although both genders scored relatively low on this 5-point scale.

SUBSIDIARY ANALYSES BY INTEREST IN FURTHER VOLUNTARY TRAINING

Although not a part of our primary focus in this study, we solicited parents' interest in a second, voluntary 2-hour "advanced skills" training class. Of 124 responding parents, 35 indicated such interest. Because of the issue of voluntarism versus mandated participation in education programs for divorcing parents, we examined whether these two groups differed systematically in reactions to the class, evaluations of their children, or in level of mastery of skills taught.

There were no differences in demographic variables (age, gender, social class), nor in length of separation. The parents who expressed interest in an additional class rated the first 2-hour class as more relevant (3.45 vs. 2.79; $t = 3.10$, $df = 122$, $p < .005$), but not more realistic or useful. There were no differences in perceptions of the child's adjustment, maturity of views, or need for therapy. There were no differences in angry interchanges with the other parent or the amount of conflict to which the child was exposed. There were no differences in support for the child's relationship with the other

Table 2
Significant Gender Differences

	Male	Female	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Class Evaluation					
Realism	3.47	3.85	2.21	124	< .05
Skills Training Items					
What would parent say (total)	3.58	3.19	2.01	126	< .05
Self-Reported Behaviors					
Child time with other parent	186.59	155.98	2.04	42	< .05
Encourage time with other parent	5.17	34.13	3.42	36	< .001
Child Adjustment					
Child would benefit from therapy	1.68	1.23	2.43	47	< .05

parent, in the amount of anger expressed, or the extent to which the divorce was discussed with the child. On the skills variables, there were no differences in quality of responses to the three stressful situations items, and no differences in frequency of putting children in the middle.

DISCUSSION

REACTIONS OF PARENTS TO THE CLASS

One occasionally hears complaints from individual parents or their attorneys (see, e.g., Tamar, 1995) that the classes are unnecessary, inconvenient, or burdensome. However, data from this and other studies consistently contradict these concerns, and suggest that once having completed the class, parents find them to be relevant, realistic, and useful. The typical quotations with which we opened this article provide eloquent anecdotal support for this finding.

As interventions-oriented clinical and experimental psychologists who have spent long careers working with families and children, we have long believed that an interactive learning format is more effective than a passive, didactic experience in teaching and encouraging the subsequent use of new skills. An abundant literature in both child and adult education supports this view (see, e.g., O'Leary & Wilson, 1975).² There can be little doubt that parents need to see desirable behaviors being modeled, if not practiced. Unfortunately, many divorce education classes around the country amount to little more than large lecture classes, possibly with a motivating children's testimonial video.

Although there was no passive learning comparison group in this study, we are encouraged by the high ratings given to the perceived usefulness of the discussion aspect of the class. Divorce education classes that fail to engage parents in interaction (discussions, exercises, role plays, etc.) are likely to be less than optimally successful and lead to parent dissatisfaction. Ideally, planners should provide for small classes of long enough duration to allow for ample parent participation and skills practice.

Many divorce education group leaders, marital therapists, clinical psychologists, mediators, and family court judges have noted that it is common for divorcing parents to be so involved in their own emotional turmoil that they may underestimate or be unaware of the level and persistence of their children's trauma. One of the goals of the Children in the Middle program is to increase parents' sensitivity to the situation that their children find to be stressful. The data indicate that parents' awareness of their lack of knowledge of their children's difficulties was indeed enhanced by the class. We believe this awareness is a necessary precursor to parental motivation to improve the quality of parenting behavior.

This increased awareness of the children's needs is further underscored by the commitment on the part of parents to dramatically reduce the amount of parental conflict to which the children would be exposed subsequent to the class—a commitment that parents reported they were successful at achieving over a 6-month period. Assuming that the parents are reasonably accurate in their assessments and self-reports, this is a very encouraging finding.

MAINTENANCE OF CHANGES OVER TIME

The class resulted in the acquisition of new problem-solving skills by the parents, as evidenced by their open-ended responses regarding what they would *do* (although not in what they would *say*) in three typically stressful situations involving conflicts and/or disagreements with the other parent. This is the first step in producing improved parental response in real-life situations. However, in the absence of trained observers in the home, we cannot be sure that such skills are actually used. Parents can self-report that they used the skills, but their responses in many cases would be confounded with social desirability. We can gain confidence in actual implementation if (a) parents can still demonstrate the skills 6 months after learning them, and (b) we have indirect evidence of changes in parental behaviors and/or children's responses.

In response to the first criterion, the evidence is very encouraging. At the 6-month follow-up assessment, parents showed no decrement in their ability

to resolve the three situations in a functional fashion. Thus, learned skills were maintained, which may indicate that they were practiced.

In regard to the second criterion, several indications suggest that new skills and sensitivities resulted in favorable outcomes. First, parents reported significant declines in the frequencies with which they put their children in the middle of parental conflicts and problems (carrying messages, put-downs of the other parent, money problems, and spying). This is further bolstered by the data on reductions in exposure to conflict in general, as discussed above. Additional confirmatory evidence is reported in the section below.

TREATMENT VERSUS COMPARISON GROUPS

Perhaps the most powerful evidence of changed behaviors would come from comparison of parents who contemporaneously were filing for divorce and who were randomly assigned either to parent education or to a waiting-list control (or some other unrelated but equally attentive intervention). Such assignments are possible (see, e.g., Arbuthnot et al., in press), but rare outside the confines of the ecologically sterile psychology laboratory. At best, field research must resort to a reasonable comparison group. This study employed the latter, consisting of parents who had filed for divorce in the same county during the year prior to the institution of the parent education classes. No differences were found between treatment and comparison groups in demographic or marital characteristics, enhancing our confidence in the adequacy of the comparison.

Sensitivity Items

We found two significant indicators that the treatment parents were more aware of the impact of the divorce on their children and of their children's consequent needs. First, treatment group parents rated themselves as significantly *less* aware of their children's views of the divorce. Although seemingly in the wrong direction, we believe that this result is a clear indicator that parents have been sensitized to the fact that their children are likely to have been adversely affected by the divorce and postdivorce family situation, and that they may not be aware of the exact problems. In contrast, comparison group parents may well be overestimating how "tuned in" they are to their children's reactions—possibly assuming that they have few or no problems and are not experiencing much distress over the family break-up. Quite often a good outcome of an educational experience is to have learned what one does *not* know.

The treatment group parents were also apparently more aware of their children's need to be parented by both the mother and father. (Both *Children in the Middle* and the booklet *What About the Children* discuss the need for parents to give children permission to love and have access to the other parent.) Treatment group parents were willing to let their children spend nearly half of their time with the other parent (44% of the year), whereas the comparison group figure was only 26%.

Self-Reported Behaviors

Although treatment group parents may be more willing to have their children spend more time with the other parent, there was no reported tendency for them to verbally tell their children that the other parent cares about them, or to encourage them to spend more time with that parent. Thus, the level of change appears to be one of tolerance rather than of actively promoting a good relationship with the other parent. This position may become more proactive as emotions are tempered over time.

Sharing feelings about the divorce with one's children may or may not be appropriate. It could be constructive if the discussions center around how to deal with one's emotional stress or pain, or if the goal is to get children to open up about their feelings. It could be destructive if the interaction is one of blaming, belittling, and devaluing of family members or relationships, or seeking adultlike support and comfort from one's children. Parents in the treatment group reported significantly fewer episodes of feeling upset or depressed about the divorce. However, there were no differences in the reported frequency of discussing the divorce or of the parent's feelings with the children. We suspect that our questions were insufficiently sensitive to the nuances of positive versus negative discussions.

Although treatment group parents reportedly were able to achieve their goal of reducing the amount of conflict to which their children were exposed, this does not mean that conflict was avoided in interactions between parents. We had hoped that instruction in using "I" messages would provide parents with sufficient skills to reduce the frequency of interparental arguing. Unfortunately, there was only a nonsignificant trend for parents in the treatment group to have a lower reported frequency with which conversations between parents ended in arguments. Using "I" messages is a difficult skill to learn. The classes did not consistently practice this tactic. We believe that practice is necessary and should be a component of classes and of materials sent home with parents. It is also possible that parents have learned this skill and will make greater use of it when the divorce is further behind them (at the time of

their class, these parents were, in most cases, in between filing and initial hearings).

One of the major goals of parent education is to improve the quality of the lives of children of divorce. It is difficult to obtain sensitive and valid measures of children's adjustment. Parental reports may or may not be accurate—they are susceptible to a variety of influences. It is possible that the relatively low number of significant differences on child adjustment questions was the result of demand characteristics of the questions (minimizing the frequency of problem behaviors because of social desirability). Further, comparison group parents were likely unaware of the frequency with which they involved children in potentially stressful discussions.

There is evidence to suggest that the latter may be the more viable interpretation. For example, Gordon, Kurkowski, and Arbuthnot (1991) found that parents substantially underreported instances of putting children in the middle of parental conflicts in comparison to reports made by their children. In this study, when examining more objective indicators of adjustment, treatment group parents reported that their children had experienced fewer days absent from school than did comparison group parents, and had fewer visits to physicians. Local pediatricians tell us that most visits by children whose parents are undergoing divorce are for stress-related symptoms. Our results strongly suggest that the children of treatment group parents were indeed experiencing less stress than were the children of the comparison group parents, an outcome consistent with lowered levels of exposure to parental conflict.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

There were surprisingly few differences by gender in responses to the program, sensitivity to children's needs, skills acquisition, or self-reported behaviors. Mothers perceived the program to be more realistic than did fathers, although there was no difference in perceived relevance. This may suggest that mothers are more sensitive to the types of problems illustrated in the program, that they are more likely to be victimized by the problems, or that they more frequently engage in the problem behaviors.

On the other hand, fathers were more likely to learn the skills taught by the program, at least in terms of applying them to specific problem-solving situations. In this regard, they gave more functional responses in terms of what they would *say* to their children in the open-ended situations (but no difference was observed by gender in terms of what they would *do* in response to the problem).

There were gender differences in how much time parents would be willing to have the child spend with the other parent (fathers granted 30 more days

per year to mothers than vice versa), and how often the parent encouraged the child to spend time with the other parent (mothers reported nearly seven times as many encouraging statements over a 3-month period than did fathers). Both of these responses reflect the reality of parenting plan arrangements—mothers already were spending much greater amounts of time with the child than were the fathers.

Only one difference was found on measures of child adjustment—fathers were more likely to believe that the child would benefit from therapy. This is consistent with much of the literature on child adjustment in divorce, in which fathers are more likely than mothers to report that their children are experiencing difficulties.

Overall, the small number of significant differences observed relative to the number of comparisons made leads us to conclude that gender is not an important factor in responsiveness to mandatory education for divorcing parents.

DIFFERENCES BY INTEREST IN FURTHER TRAINING

In the same fashion, interest in additional training appears not to be an important factor in responsiveness to the program. Although one might expect that those who were more motivated to acquire skills would be more inclined to acquire and use skills to their children's benefit, we did not find sufficient evidence of such a phenomenon to lend any confidence to the presumption. In a sense, this is a favorable finding—there is no particular advantage to being highly motivated to benefit from the class. Although this does not speak directly to the issue of the relative effectiveness of voluntary versus mandatory programs, it suggests that the issue is probably exaggerated and of little importance.

SUMMARY

In sum, we believe that the results of this long-term outcome study of parental responses to a mandatory divorce education program allow us to conclude that (a) parents value the program, (b) parents learn useful parenting and communications skills, and (c) there are encouraging findings that the program results in lowered exposure of children to parental conflict and greater tolerance for the parenting role of the other parent, with attendant positive changes in children's well-being.

At the same time, it is clear that more direct and independent assessments of child outcomes are advisable and necessary before we can strongly speak to generalized favorable outcomes for children. Similarly, to enhance such

child outcomes, it may be desirable to conduct parallel group sessions for children to normalize their experiences, provide them with social and emotional support, train them in skills that will empower them to deal with parental pressures, and provide them with cognitive and behavioral alternatives when they are faced by overwhelming stress, confusion, and disappointment.

In addition, we believe that education programs for divorcing parents should be both participatory and skills oriented. Learning and behavior change are more likely to occur when parents are actively engaged and are taught specific solutions to problems. However, this issue remains to be assessed through a direct comparison of the efficacy of active versus more passive programs.

Finally, it is evident that mandatory educational programs for divorcing parents can teach useful skills that parents are able to learn and use in difficult postdivorce family situations. To the extent that the use of these skills reduces their own frustrations, anger, and depression and reduces the stresses imposed on children and ex-spouses, appreciable benefits will accrue not only to the divorcing families but to their schools, courts, and communities.

NOTES

1. The video is produced by the Center for Divorce Education, P.O. Box 5900, Athens, OH 45701. This research was based on the first edition of *Children in the Middle*. The second edition is now available. See Arbuthnot and Gordon (1994a) and Gordon and Arbuthnot (1990).

2. Specific studies, such as Webster-Stratton (1984), indicate that although instructional video alone is no less effective than video combined with discussion, both are superior to no video.

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