

**‘CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE’
A PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR SEPARATED PARENTS**

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Abstract

Parent education for separating parents with children is conducted widely internationally but not currently available in New Zealand. This project, initiated by the Auckland Family Courts Association, involved the development and evaluation of a pilot education programme entitled 'Children in the Middle' (CiM) at Auckland's North Shore. CiM is based on those run overseas and consists of two, two-hour sessions over two consecutive weeks. The format includes a combination of didactic presentation, video clips illustrating legal issues, provision of written information, group participation via questions and answers, and discussion. Group size is limited to 15, with one presenter being a psychologist and the other a lawyer. Separating couples attend separate sessions.

Evaluation of the programme included the first 6 months of programme implementation, involving nine groups. Data was available for 76 participants. Pre- post- programme measures showed an increase in parent knowledge about the impact of separation on children and an improvement in children's behaviour and well being, as assessed by the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire. Child behaviour change was maintained at 3-4 month follow-up. Time alone did not cause difference as indicated by the lack of change in a wait-list control group. A reduction in parent conflict, as measured by the Acrimony Scale, was evident at follow-up. Participants reported a very high level of satisfaction with CiM as measured on a consumer satisfaction measure. Analysis of semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and seven stakeholders 3 months after the programme provided confirmation of the positive outcomes shown in the quantitative data, including high levels of satisfaction with the programme, and evidence of improved parent communication, particularly in respect of conflict management, and improved child behaviour. This interview data also provided suggestions for future programme development.

CiM is designed as a preventative intervention aimed at decreasing the risks for children arising from their parent's separation. The present study provides support for the wider implementation of parent education of this type.

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We thank the former and present Principal Family Court Judges, Judge Mahony and Judge Boshier for their encouragement and support. We also thank the North Shore Family Court, especially Judge Ryan, Bruce Archer and Marg Dixon. Family Court Coordinator Marg Dixon’s enthusiasm for this programme was a vital part of the programme reaching as many participants as it did. The support of lawyers and counsellors has also contributed to the flow of referrals to the programme. A programme such as CiM is not an intervention on its own, but rather, a part of a wider system of support to families from a variety of dedicated professionals.

We are grateful to The University of Auckland for support of a staff member (Fred Seymour) and student (Lynelle Gillard) in this work, and to the Ministry of Justice for approving the pilot implementation. We thank Dr Suzanne Barker-Collo for her advice on the statistical analysis, and Dr Claire Cartwright for advice on the qualitative analysis.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

This project involved the development, implementation and evaluation of a pilot education programme entitled 'Children in the Middle' (CiM) at Auckland's North Shore. Parent education for separating parents with children is conducted widely internationally but not currently available in New Zealand. A 'parent education programme' is "an organised group meeting(s) that has an educational rather than counselling or mediation purpose and focuses on the divorce transition for families" (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996, p.25). Its overall aim is preventative in nature. Research shows that parental interaction styles, and conflict in particular, contributes to adjustment difficulties experienced by children (Grych, 2005; Kelly, 2000; Pryor & Seymour, 1996). Parent education programmes focus on how parents can best get their children through this difficult transition period. Children's needs are often minimised or

even overlooked by parents during the process of separation, especially where parents are in conflict. Children's loyalties often become torn and their security threatened during the separation process, and it's aftermath.

Pryor and Seymour (1996) noted that an overarching principle of the Family Court is that the best interests of the child are paramount and thus studies are needed to examine optimal ways of supporting parents and children in the early post-separation transition in order to minimise their exposure to conflict and establish co-parenting patterns which are acceptable and workable for all involved. A recently published report of the Law Commission (2003) identified the need for a parent education programme as an integral part of the conciliation process. They stated that such a programme would alert the parents to the needs of their children, as well as provide information about the conciliation process.

While there have been some isolated, community-based parent education programmes offered to families in NZ there have to date been no systematic Court associated programmes offered in the way envisaged by the Law Commission, and commonly available in USA Family Court jurisdictions and elsewhere.

The present programme was initiated by the Chairperson of the Auckland Family Courts Association, Brian Gubb, who contacted Associate Professor Fred Seymour at the University of Auckland Psychology Department to invite him to participate in setting up a programme in Auckland. The Auckland Family Court Association agreed to run a pilot programme and invited Lynelle Gillard, a Clinical Psychology doctoral student to be involved. It was decided to run CiM on Auckland's North Shore. Support for the pilot was given by the then Principal Family Court Judge, Judge Patrick Mahony, the Auckland Administrative Judge, Judge Lawrence Ryan and the Ministry of Justice. After some initial consultation, an Advisory Group was established. Advisory Group members included Brian Gubb, Fred Seymour, Lynelle Gillard, Bruce Archer, Marg Dixon, Amanda Donovan, Hana Ellis, Andrew Finnie, Wayne Gates, Ian McHardy and Keith Young. Initial work in developing CiM took place during 2003, and CiM commenced in February, 2004.

Relevant Research

The vast majority of research on parent education programmes has been conducted in the USA, where they are commonly referred to as "divorce education programmes". The most common objectives of

such programmes have been to provide information for parents about how children typically respond to separation, to alert parents to the potential impact of parent conflict and other harmful behaviours, and to present the importance of children being able to maintain close relationships (Griesler & Braisure, 1999; Kelly, 2000). Programmes represent a preventative approach, better preparing parents for mediation and in particular enabling them to consider the needs of their children in negotiating parenting arrangements (Braver, Salem, Pearson, & DeLuse, 1996).

The content of programmes vary from didactic to skill based. Blaisure and Geasler (2000) surveyed 1500 USA counties offering divorce education programmes and from this concluded that there were three levels of education operating in court systems: basic information provision, communication skill training, and brief focused intervention. The basic information level can reach a larger number of people in little time, at lower cost. A one-session programme with lecture, videotape, and handouts is an example of this. While useful when time and resources are limited, there is typically little opportunity for discussion or teaching of parent communication skills. Level two, communication skill training, helps parents to gain awareness of behaviours that reduce conflict, and ways to protect their children from exposure to conflict. Such programmes are typically run over several sessions and feature experiential learning activities such as small group discussion, exercises and/or role-plays. This is of limited use when parents' problems are too intense to be worked with constructively in an educational group. Level three, brief focused intervention, provides individually designed plans for overcoming major problems. This multi-session programme would suit individuals or couples who are experiencing troubled or highly conflicted co-parenting relationships. Highly trained presenters are required and possibly an increased level of other resources, such as adjunctive counselling.

Systematic evaluation has found benefits for parents when compared to parents who do not receive education programmes (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004; Whitworth, Capshaw & Abell, 2002). Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis and Hoza (1998) compared two types of parent education programmes, skill based and information only, and found that regardless of programme attended, participating parents experienced more reciprocal discussions with the other parent, less parental conflict, less domestic violence, and their children were less exposed to conflict compared to the comparison group. Thoennes and Pearson's (1999) multi-site assessment of five court-affiliated parent education programmes found that the parents credited them with helping to sensitise them to their children's needs and with making visitation more successful and enjoyable. Kelly (2000) reviewed research relating to children's adjustment to conflicted marriage and divorce over the decade 1990-

1999. She found that with parent education programmes re-litigation rates were lower, there were higher rates of willingness to have children spend time with the other parent, increased parent cooperation, and less likelihood of the parents putting their child in the middle of their disputes. The review also showed that high conflict parents benefited the most. Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) reported that parent education programmes dramatically lowered child exposure to parental conflict. They found parents valued the programmes, learned useful parenting and communication skills, showed greater tolerance for the parenting role of the other parent, with attendant positive changes in the children's well-being also observed.

Kelly (2000) considers that programmes which focus on skill-building - learning new communication and conflict reduction behaviours - are more effective overall than programmes which are either more didactic or which use affect-oriented video-components. Furthermore, programmes incorporating video, skill building demonstrations and exercises, discussion, handouts, and some didactic presentations are more effective than programmes relying on just one format (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999; Kramer et al., 1998).

Regarding the more common (in USA) shorter duration divorce education programmes Grych (2005) concludes, they "are well received by parents and viewed as helpful by practitioners". Also, while there are very few evaluations incorporating randomised allocation to programme and control groups, two programmes that have incorporated this research design have shown positive effects from programme participation for interpersonal conflict, parenting ability, and children's adjustment.

Another dimension of programmes is whether attendance is voluntary or 'mandated' (which generally means that parents are unable to access other parts of the court system such as mediation and hearings until they have attended the programme). Research has included the opinions of professionals and parents in relation to the impact of these two options. Arbuthnot and Kramer (1998), in a nationwide (USA) survey of family mediators, found an overwhelming majority (nearly 70%) believe that divorce education should be mandated for all parents regardless of presenting problem. These professionals, working first hand with divorcing couples, see at least some benefit in divorce education for couples in all circumstances. Research reviewed by Kelly (2000) indicated that parent satisfaction is high even among those mandated to attend education programmes (and who initially did not want to attend).

Most evaluations of programmes available in the USA have not been evaluated further than a client-satisfaction questionnaire using a Likert-type scale (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996). These have usually provided positive responses. Even more scarce is research involving qualitative methods to provide richer or more “in-depth” information (Patton, 1990; Stone, Clark, & McKenry, 2000). While quantitative research may provide the information that parent participants found the programme provided them with new knowledge about the impact on their children, qualitative interviews could provide the details of what that knowledge was specifically (e.g., children exposed to conflict between parents negatively impacts children) and what change in behaviour the parent made as a result of learning that information.

In conclusion, from the mainly USA.-based literature on parent education programmes, there appears to be overwhelming support from both professionals in the field as well as parents who have attended such programmes, that there is benefit to be gained by attending. While the issue of mandatory attendance is somewhat controversial, the vast majority of professionals found it to be desirable as they maintain that all parents will gain some benefit. Yet mandated programmes are by necessity short and didactic which is thought to be less useful than skill based programmes. However, shorter programmes may provide a good starting place by providing new information that promotes changes in behaviour, and gives new options that individuals can pursue for their own and their children’s benefit.

Description of the CiM Programme

The Advisory Group consisted of the Manager of the North Shore Family Court, the Family Court Co-ordinator, a counsellor, six lawyers including five who did ‘Counsel for Child’ work, two of whom were Maori. The two authors, one a Registered Psychologist and the other a clinical psychology doctoral student, convened the group and continue to be members of it. CiM was developed and implemented in collaboration with this Advisory Group, and the group continues to meet monthly. The format and process of CiM was developed to cater for the majority of clients and accordingly reflects mainstream cultural values. Variations to cater more specifically for Maori and other cultural ethnicities have yet to be developed. This issue is commented on more specifically in the discussion section.

Lynelle Gillard initially developed CiM content by interviewing a range of professionals (including some Advisory Group members) to gather opinions as to what content should be included. Lynelle Gillard and Fred Seymour also reviewed relevant literature concerning the impact of separation on children particularly the effectiveness of conciliation processes, and education programmes A standard

format emerged from this process, which was trialled and continued to be evaluated and developed over the next few months, although the basic content did not change (for CiM outline, see Appendix A). The content included topics such as 'How separation affects children,' 'Parent's experience of separation,' 'What parents can do to help their children,' 'Understanding the Family Court,' 'Options for parenting plans' and 'How to communicate with your ex-partner'. The presentation employed a Law Foundation sponsored video by Brent Williams (Education Resources, 1999) about the Family Court, which includes interviews with parents who have separated and professionals involved in Family Court work, as well as acted scenes of a separated couple and are in conflict.

CiM is based on those run overseas and consists of two, two-hour sessions over two consecutive weeks. It was conducted between February and July in 2004. Over this period there were nine groups in total ranging from four to 13 participants that completed both of the sessions and the initial research. On average there were between eight and nine participants per session. The aim was to have groups consisting of up to 15 people as it was found that active participation in other parent education groups was inversely related to group size, with this number being optimum (Hughes & Kirby, 2000). Separating couples attended different sessions from one another. Programme participants were given the choice of attending evening groups usually run on a Thursday or occasionally a Monday. The format included a combination of didactic presentation, use of video clips illustrating legal issues, group participation via questions and answers, and discussion. A brief time for one-on-one discussion with the facilitators was made available over the tea-break and at the end of the session. Questions presented in writing over the break were also addressed during the evening or, if appropriate, the following week. Written information, including suggestions for obtaining further resources, was provided as part of the presentation package. The sessions were all facilitated by Fred Seymour and co-facilitated by a lawyer (drawn from a roster of three). Facilitation methods drew upon knowledge about divorce education, adult learning theory, and psychoeducation.

Aims Of The Study

The aim of the evaluation was to examine whether participation in CiM, a parent education programme in the New Zealand context, produced the following effects:

1. An increase in parents' knowledge about the impact of divorce on children.
2. Changes in parent behaviour and communication to produce more effective interaction and a reduction in conflict.

3. Improved child behaviour.
4. Consumer satisfaction as reported by parents in a questionnaire, and by parents and key stakeholders through semi-structured interviews.
5. Improved conciliation on issues concerning children as assessed by self- and stakeholder-report.

The information collected included both quantitative and qualitative data. It was noted that programme evaluations in the United States relied to a great extent on consumer satisfaction, and to a lesser extent, on quantitative analysis. The evaluation design included information collected prior to the first session, a consumer satisfaction measure at the completion of the second session, repeated measures taken at 2 – 4 weeks following session completion, and at 3 – 4 months follow-up. An unanticipated opportunity arose for a wait-list control group comprised of a sub-sample of participants: measures were taken at first contact then repeated 2 – 4 weeks later, prior to their attendance at their first session. This ‘between-group comparison’ enabled a comparison of responses over a similar time-period as the CiM participants, for the sub-sample of parents who had not at that stage participated in CiM. After attending CiM their data was included with that of the main study. In addition, the within-group comparisons (i.e., comparisons of pre-, post-, and follow- up scores of the large group) were also important to further reveal the potential effects of attending the CIM programme. The qualitative information was obtained approximately four to six months after the participants had attended CiM.

The evaluation design had an emphasis on information collection that aided the development of CiM, and therefore was a process evaluation as well as an outcome evaluation. The content of CiM evolved in response to the feedback obtained from participants although the core content and programme structure remained constant.

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

Setting

CiM sessions were run at a community facility made available to Relationship Services by the City Council on Auckland's North Shore. The information used in the evaluation was collected before and after the sessions on-site, and subsequently by post and telephone.

Participants

Parent participants

All parents who had separated or were contemplating separation and who were enrolling for participation in the CiM programme were invited and chose to participate in this study (N = 76). It was most common that only one of the parents of former couples attended; although there were three cases where both of the parents attended. No screening was conducted other than to ensure that former partners attended different sessions. There were several men who were the subject of Domestic Violence orders, and several women whose ex-partners had Domestic Violence orders applied to them. Most parents (N=74 or 97%), completed the first questionnaire set at the beginning of attending the first session, 58 (76%) completed and posted the second questionnaire set two to four weeks later and 46 (61%) completed the third set of follow-up questionnaires three to four (although some arrived up to six) months later.

At intake the sample of parents consisted of 43 (56.6%) females and 33 (43.4%) males. The majority of participants lived on Auckland's North Shore and indicated that they were of Pakeha/New Zealand European ethnicity (81.6%) with New Zealand Maori (1.3%), Pacific Island (2.6%), Asian (2.6%), with the remainder (11.8%) being immigrants from Europe or South African.

The majority of the sample was aged between 26 and 45 years, with 27 (35.5%) falling between the ages of 26 and 35, and 37 (48.7%) falling between the ages of 36 and 45. The remaining 11 participants (14.5%) were aged 45 or older. The highest educational attainment reported by the parents was nearly equally divided between those that attended school up to or including 5th form (17; 22.4%), completed secondary school only (18; 23.7%), achieved basic tertiary education or training (17, 22.4%) and those who had achieved advanced tertiary education (post graduate) (16, 21.1%). The majority worked in skilled or semi-skilled work (30.3% and 31.6 % respectively) with 13 (17.1%) working full time in the home, 9 (11.8%) working in a professional capacity, 4 (5.3%) being in unskilled employment and one person reported that they were unemployed.

The majority of the participants had two children (42.1 %) with a further 35.5% of parents had just one child. Just over 21% reported having three children and one parent reported having four children. The ages of the children ranged from two months to 22 years of age at the time of enrolling in CiM. The average age of their first child was 8.85 years (SD = 4.546).

Slightly more than 9% of the parents had not separated from their partners. One third (32.9%) had separated within the previous six months, nearly 8% had separated within the last year, nearly 20% had separated with the previous two years, nearly a quarter had separated between two and five years ago (22.4%) and 7.9% over five years ago.

In regards to child care arrangements the participants had for their children, 15 had full care (19.7% of which 14 were women), and the same amount had majority care. Equal time care was the arrangement for 21 participants (27.6% of which 13 were women). Fourteen participants (18.4% of which 11 were men) reported having a minority share, and 11 (14.5% of which 10 were men) reported having no overnight care of their children at all.

In determining the amount of experience that the parents had had with the Family Court process and associated services, 58 (76.3%) had visited a lawyer in regard to their separation, 57 (75%) had attended Family Court counselling, 17 (22.4%) had had counsel-for-child appointed, 5 (6.8%) had had a psychologist appointed by the court, 12 (15.8%) reported receiving mediation at the court, and 10 (13.2%) had attended a court hearing regarding their separation.

The majority of the participants, 33 (43.4%) had heard about CiM through the Family Court Coordinator. The remainder heard about it through their lawyer, (17.1%), counsellor (15.8%), the media (11.8%), through friends or relatives (6.6%), through their ex-partner (3.9%) and one person had heard about it from a judge.

Wait-list control group

The opportunity for a wait-list control group arose because of an enforced gap in session availability, over-subscription to sessions, or to session availability not suiting the participants' immediate timetable (e.g., out of town for work, clash with work or child-care roster, sports timetable, etc.). This group was a sub sample of the larger group and consisted of 27 parents who had applied to attend CiM but due to the timing of the next session had not yet engaged in it. They were put on a waiting list and asked if they would participate in preliminary data collection. They completed this two to four weeks prior to attending CiM and partaking in the main study.

In order to examine equivalence of the two groups (large group versus wait group control), a one-way ANOVA was performed with group as the grouping variable and number of children and age of eldest child as the dependent variable. The results of this analysis indicated that the large and wait group control differed significantly on the age of the eldest child ($F(1,73) = 5.503, p = .022$). The mean age of the eldest child for the wait group control was older at 9.75 ($SD = 4.455$) compared with 7.26 ($SD = 4.338$). Number of children did not significantly differ across the two groups ($p > .05$).

To examine equivalence for categorical variables, a Mann-Whitney U test for two independent samples was conducted with group as the grouping variable and the following as dependent variables: gender, participant age category, cultural identity, educational attainment, employment type, length of time since separation; parental care arrangement type and use of Family Court services. The groups did not differ significantly on any of these variables ($p > .05$).

Participant interview group

A sub-sample of 20 parents (11 females, nine males) who had completed the CiM programme were interviewed in addition to having already completed questionnaires. They were selected from the 90% of participants who had indicated on consumer satisfaction questionnaires that they were interested in having a one-on-one interview to discuss their experiences and opinions of CiM further. These 20 were

selected on the basis of gaining a balance of gender, care arrangements of their children (custodial status), length of time since separation, and group attended. While selection did not initially take account of satisfaction scores, subsequently some who indicated negative opinions about CiM were included within the sample (see Stone, Clarke & McKenry, 2000, for rationale).

The majority of these participants were aged between 26 and 35, had some type of tertiary education, had skilled occupations although one quarter indicated they were 'stay at home' parents. They had between one and three children. The age of their eldest child ranged from four to 21 (half being in the pre-adolescent age grouping of 10-12 years), length of time since separation included those who were 'not separated' (but were in the process of separating) to those 'separated for nine years or more', care arrangements varied, with only a few not having regular time with their children. Only two had been to a court hearing with most having been to see a lawyer and/or attended court-counselling.

Stakeholder interview group

Eight key stakeholders were chosen to be interviewed based on a representative sampling strategy. The sample consisted of four Family Court Counsellors (3 females, 1 male), three Lawyers/Barristers who do 'Counsel-for-child' work (1 female, 2 males), and one Family Court Co-ordinator (female). All of these people worked within the North Shore area, and had some interest in the CiM programme.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee. The Department for Courts subsequently gave their approval for this project to be conducted. As required by the University of Auckland Ethics Committee, each participant received a written Information Sheet (see Appendix B), provided consent verbally and by active participation in completing the questionnaires, and signed a consent-form (see Appendix C) to participate in the audio-taping of the qualitative research. Attendance at CiM was voluntary. It was also the case that participation in the evaluation was voluntary and anyone who may have declined to be involved in the CiM evaluation was still able to attend CiM.

All parents that applied to the Family Court concerning custody and access issues were given verbal and written information about CiM by Family Court Coordinators (see Appendix D). Some lawyers, counsellors, and community agencies also gave prospective participants the information. This participant information sheet included information about CiM, contact details, and a statement that CiM had the support of the Executive Judge from the Auckland region. Ninety-four prospective participants then phoned to register their interest in attending CiM. The researcher phoned them back, usually within a twenty-four hour period, provided further details and answered any queries, and then booked the applicant into CiM if appropriate. Every person spoken to indicated their intention to attend and registered for CiM. However, nine people were not able to book in to a session over the time frame of the study, and a further five people did not arrive at the first session. Follow-up telephone calls found this was due to their experiencing current time-management or child-care difficulties, or other current personal crises. Similarly, four parents attended one session but not both. Follow-up telephone calls found a variety of reasons for this, including one person who had a bereavement, but there were also programme-related objections such as there being too much information about younger children (by two parents of older teenagers). With these people removed from the sample, there was a total sample population of 76 participants.

The registration process also entailed explaining the purpose and voluntary nature of the research including that their refusal to take part in the study would in no way affect their participation in CiM or in any of the Family Court services. Assurance of strict confidentiality for the participant was repeatedly provided. If the participant verbally consented to being part of the research study (all did so) further information was obtained about their experience with the court process to date as well as socio-demographic information. Demographic variables of interest included gender, custodial status of parent, number and age of children, ethnicity and length of time since separation. Data was also gathered on the level of involvement that the participant had previously had with the Family Court. Confirmation of their enrolment in CiM, and information about the proposed evaluation of CiM was then posted to them. Participants who applied approximately one month before they were able to attend the next programme, were sent out a pack of questionnaires to complete two to four weeks before attending the first session. These participants (the wait-list control group) posted these questionnaires back to the researcher (a few brought them back when attending CiM). Throughout this process it was made clear verbally and in the written documentation that if they declined to be involved in the CiM evaluation this would not prejudice their ability to attend CiM.

A series of four sets of questionnaires were administered to the experimental group: Immediately before participating in the CiM programme, immediately following its completion (at the end of the second session), two to four weeks following CiM, and three to four months after completing CiM. The first, third and fourth sets of questionnaires were very similar with the only difference being the follow-up version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire was used in the latter two sets, and the second data collection included only the parent evaluation of CiM. The first two questionnaire sets were completed at the programme site while the latter two were conducted by mail.

Twenty-seven parents who had separated or were contemplating separation were included in the wait-list control group. The wait-group control participants completed an initial set of questionnaires by mail two- to- four weeks prior to attending CiM, and completed a second set along with other participants at the beginning of the first session. Data collected from this control group was assessed to determine if there were any time or other effects that were likely to cause change in responses. If there were no changes as a result of time alone, then changes observed following attendance at the CiM programme could be attributed with greater confidence to an impact of CiM.

The posted replies were received at the University of Auckland to ensure security and privacy of responses.

Participant interviews: Interviews with participants and stakeholders were conducted by telephone at a time that was mutually convenient. A general inductive approach was utilized for gaining understanding of the perspectives of the participants who were involved in the interview (Thomas, 2004). The participants had all talked with the researcher before attending CiM and agreed to be interviewed by telephone at a time that was mutually convenient. The participants were sent information regarding the research project and were required to sign a consent form for the audio-taping of their interview. Their confidentiality in taking part in this study was assured. A semi-structured questionnaire, consisting of open-ended questions with follow-up prompts, was used as a guide but the interview included the exploration of issues that the participants raised (Appendix E). Questioning was based on programme objectives described above and focused on the experience of the participants in CiM and on any knowledge or behavioural change they had noticed since, both in themselves or in their children.

The taped interviews, which took 30 – 60 minutes, were transcribed. The resulting scripts read through as raw-form text several times. Units of meaning were identified from which consistent themes emerged. These themes were assigned to categories that were combined to produce a smaller number of broad thematic categories. The text was then coded according to the broad categories and all text of the same code were assembled together assisted by Excel, through a process of filtering and grouping. A consistency check was provided by having an independent coder who was familiar with the research objectives, code raw text using a description of the categories developed (Thomas, 2004).

Stakeholder interviews: As with the participant interviews above, follow-up interviews were conducted with stakeholders with an interest in the CiM programme. An in-depth semi-structured format was chosen (see Appendix F) to allow rapport to develop between the researcher and the interviewee and to enable a broader and more in-depth range of information to be obtained from the interviewee's perspective by following their lead when issues were important to them (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

As above, a general inductive approach was utilized for gaining understanding of the perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the interviews (Thomas, 2004). The participants, all of whom were familiar with CiM and the researcher to some extent, agreed to be interviewed by telephone at a time that was mutually convenient. The participants were sent information regarding the research project (see Appendix G) and were required to sign a consent form for the audio-taping of their interview (see Appendix H). Their confidentiality in taking part in this study was assured. A semi-structured questionnaire, consisting of open-ended questions with follow-up prompts, was used as a guide (see Appendix F) but the interview included the further exploration of issues that the participants raised. Questioning was based on programme aims described above and focused on the experience that the interviewee's had of referring clients to CiM and from feedback from the interviewee's clients and other professionals in their professional field. The taped interviews were transcribed and the resulting scripts read through as raw-form text several times. Units of meaning were identified from which consistent themes emerged. These themes were assigned to categories that were combined to produce a smaller number of broad thematic categories. The text was then coded according to the broad categories and all text of the same code were assembled together manually, to gain richer understanding of the themes within that category.

Measures

Four different measures were utilised to assess the impact of the CiM programme. These were (1) parental knowledge about the impact of divorce on children, (2) parent behaviour and communication with their ex-partner, (3) child behaviour, and (4) consumer satisfaction.

It would be desirable to assess any impact of CiM via Family Court records, but difficulties in accessing these records meant such a step was not possible.

Parent Opinion Questionnaire (POQ): Change in parental knowledge about the impact of separation on children was assessed by a brief POQ developed by the authors (see Appendix I). Parents indicated 'true' or 'false' to a series of 10 questions that assessed their knowledge on children's needs and reactions to parents separating and also to the parent's knowledge about the Family Court (e.g., "Children 'get over' less contact with the non-custodial parent – T or F?"). The questions are typical of those used in evaluations of divorce education programmes overseas (e.g., Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996).

The Acrimony Scale: Changes in parent behaviour and communication were measured by a self-report questionnaire, the Acrimony Scale (Shaw & Emery, 1987, see Appendix J). This is a 25-item, self-report questionnaire that required the participant to rate their answer to a wide variety of issues regarding their children within the context of their ex-partner, including visitation, support and general level of conflict. The items are rated on a 1 ("almost never") to 4 ("almost always") scale that is mixed in terms of direction of negativity/positivity to prevent response bias. Items include questions such as "Do you and your former partner disagree in front of the children?" and "Do your children feel friendly toward your former partner?" The scale was designed to produce one score, the mean of all items, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of animosity. It was used in this study to assess changes between feelings or behaviours of animosity rated before, two- to four- weeks after, and three- to- four months following attendance at CiM. The Acrimony Scale has been found to have high internal consistency (.86) and test-retest reliability (.88) (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001; Shaw & Emery, 1987). According to these studies, at time three, the alpha for the scale was .88 for fathers and .91 for mothers, with mothers and fathers scores being correlated .41 (N=31, $p < .05$). Correlations between Time one and Time three on the Acrimony Scale were .41 (N=33, $p < .05$) for fathers and .32 for mothers (N=41, $p < .05$).

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ): Changes in childhood behaviour were measured by the extended version of the parent-report form of the SDQ (Goodman & Scott, 1999, see Appendix K).

This screening instrument elicits parental ratings of positive and negative behaviours of children 4 to 17 years of age that may be symptoms of distress or difficulty the child is having. This is a 25-item questionnaire where participants rate 1 (“not true”) to 3 (“certainly true”) on a series of statements such as “many fears, easily scared” and “steals from home, school and elsewhere”. The questionnaire was designed to produce clusters of symptoms reflecting emotional (e.g., “often unhappy, downhearted or tearful”), conduct (e.g., “often has temper tantrums or hot tempers”), hyperactivity (e.g., “restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long”) and peer difficulties (e.g., “picked on or bullied by other children”). The questions also elicited information on strengths that the child might have in these categories, and this reduced the difficulty score. The means of these symptom scales produce a total difficulties score. There is also a pro-social score indicator (e.g., “shares readily with other children”). The extended version, the format used in the present study, includes a supplement that assesses the impact that these difficulties may have on the life of the child and the family (Goodman, 1999). The follow-up version contains subtle differences including two additional questions referring to changes observed since attending CiM, and asks the parent to answer the questions in light of behaviour observed over the previous month (rather than six months as the first questionnaire did). This instrument has had reports of test-retest reliability of up to .96 and evidence of concurrent and predictive validity with similar tests (Goodman & Scott, 1999).

Consumer satisfaction: At the end of the second session parents were asked to fill out a questionnaire designed by the authors that consisted of eleven statements about CiM (see Appendix L). The participants were asked to rate between 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 4 (“strongly agree”) on broad statements such as “The information presented will help me and my children” to more specific ones such as “I am more likely to use alternatives to settle disputes (e.g., counselling, mediation)”. These were followed by two questions on the length and time of the sessions, a comments section and a question asking for them to indicate if they were prepared to take part in a personal interview. This information was triangulated by qualitative information provided by parents and key stakeholders through semi-structured interviews.

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS FROM QUANTITATIVE DATA

Change Within Wait-list Group

In order to determine whether there were any significant trends within the data prior to participation in CiM, a series of general linear model within-subjects contrasts (i.e., repeated measures) were performed to contrast the wait-list control group participants' scores taken at two points prior to the first CiM session.

The POQ mean reflects the average score obtained on this questionnaire given the possible range of 0 – 10 for each participant, with a higher score indicating a greater level of knowledge. The means for the SDQ categories can be compared to the means that approximately 80% of a community sample achieve (i.e., 'normal' range, not likely to be experiencing difficulties): emotional symptoms 0 – 3, conduct problems 0 – 2, hyperactivity score 0 – 5, peer problems score 0 – 2, total difficulties score 0 – 13, and

prosocial behaviour score 6 – 10. Scores above these ranges indicate increased difficulty in those areas with the exception of the prosocial score, which indicates increased prosocial behaviour (Goodman, 1999). The mean for the Acrimony Scale reflects the average scores obtained on each questionnaire, which were rated 1 – 4, with higher scores indicating increased conflict (Emery et al., 2001).

As can be seen in Table 1, the results of these analyses indicate that there was no significant change in any of the measures from pre-wait to post-group ($p > .05$). While not significantly different, the direction of change noted in comparing means will be noted to ensure any further changes are not a continuation of pre-existing, non-significant trends in the data.

Table 1
Responses of the wait-list control group

| Measures | Pre-wait | | Pre-group | | Significance |
|---------------|------------------|-------|------------------|-------|----------------------------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | |
| POQ Total | 7.22 (n = 27) | 1.450 | 7.31 (n = 26) | 1.715 | F(1,25) = 0.025, p = 0.876 |
| SDQ: | | | | | |
| Emotion | 2.95 | 2.674 | 3.17 | 2.698 | F(1,19) = 0.701, p = 0.413 |
| Conduct | 2.05 | 1.596 | 1.95 | 1.191 | F(1,19) = 0.000, p = 1.000 |
| Hyperactivity | 3.81 | 2.358 | 4.00 | 2.368 | F(1,19) = 1.971, p = 0.176 |
| Peer problems | 1.25 | 1.531 | 1.75 | 2.268 | F(1,19) = 2.744, p = 0.114 |
| Total Probs | 10.06 | 6.021 | 10.87 | 6.134 | F(1,19) = 2.381, p = 0.139 |
| Pro-social | 7.33 (n = 21) | 2.082 | 7.81 (n = 20) | 2.023 | F(1,19) = 1.792, p = 0.197 |
| Acrimony | 1.24 (n = 26) | 0.420 | 1.21 (n = 23) | 0.394 | F(1,22) = 0.011, p = 0.918 |

Impact of CiM at 2-week Post Programme Attendance and 3-month Follow-up

In order to determine whether there were any significant changes as a result of participation in CiM, a series of general linear model within-subjects contrasts (i.e., repeated measures) were performed to contrast the participants' scores from just before participation in the group to those obtained 2- to 4-weeks after participation. Pre- and post- group means and SD's are presented in Table 2. In testing for significant differences, cases were excluded where data was absent for either time point. Those differences that were statistically significant ($p > .05$) are described in the following text.

There was a significant increase between pre- and post- test in parental knowledge about the impact of separation on children $F(1,56) = 19.068, p = 0.000$. In addition, there was a significant difference between pre- and post- test for parent reports of children's emotional behaviour $F(1,46) = 9.773, p = 0.003$; children's hyperactivity $F(1,46) = 7.689, p = .008$; and children's total difficulties $F(1,46) = 9.817, p = .003$. These changes were in the direction of improved behaviour. There was no significant change reported in behaviour regarding children's conduct, peer problems, or prosocial behaviour, nor in parental acrimony ($p > .05$).

Table 2.

Responses to parent-report measures of child and parental behaviour and opinions

| Measures | Pre-group | | Post-group (2- 4 weeks) | | Follow-up (3 - 4 months) | |
|---------------|-----------|-------|----------------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| POQ | 7.18 | 1.715 | 8.38 | 1.765 | 8.15 | 1.316 |
| | (n = 74) | | (n = 58) | | (n = 46) | |
| SDQ | | | | | | |
| Emotion | 3.41 | 2.622 | 2.52 | 2.492 | 2.85 | 2.466 |
| Conduct | 2.17 | 1.886 | 2.02 | 1.695 | 2.03 | 2.178 |
| Hyperactivity | 4.03 | 2.212 | 3.50 | 2.361 | 3.25 | 2.145 |
| Peer problems | 2.06 | 2.111 | 1.88 | 1.794 | 1.80 | 1.843 |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|----------|-------|----------|-------|----------|-------|
| Total problems | 11.67 | 6.201 | 9.92 | 6.174 | 9.93 | 6.541 |
| Pro social | 7.41 | 2.250 | 7.29 | 2.021 | 7.45 | 2.218 |
| | (n = 66) | | (n = 48) | | (n = 40) | |
| Acrimony Scale | 1.13 | 0.408 | 1.18 | 0.449 | 1.06 | 0.478 |
| | (n = 72) | | (n = 55) | | (n = 45) | |

Impact of CIM at 3 month Follow -up

Follow up data for 46 participants at three to four months after attending CiM is also presented in Table 2. In order to determine whether the significant changes in the data as a result of participation in the CiM were maintained 3 to 4 months later, a series of general linear model within-subjects contrasts (i.e., repeated measures) were performed to contrast the 46 participants' scores from just before participation in the group to those obtained 3- to 4- months after participation, across the measures.

The results of these analyses indicate that there was a significant difference between the pre- and follow-up groups in parental knowledge $F(1,43) = 13.953, p = 0.001$. Table 2 shows that parent's knowledge of the effects of separation on children continued to be elevated three to four months after the parents had attended CiM. There was also a significant difference between the pre- and follow-up groups in children's level of hyperactivity $F(1,38) = 11.421, p = 0.002$. As Table 2 shows, there continued to be a decrease in hyperactivity sustained over the 3- to 4- month follow-up period. There were no other significant differences found between the other variables over the pre- and post-group period ($p > .05$).

There was a significant difference found in parents acrimony scores between the post-group and follow-up period. Table 2 shows that the average scores of marital conflict had decreased over this time although not to a level of significant difference to the pre-group scores. There was no significant difference between the 2- week post-group and the 3- to 4- month follow-up results in parental knowledge, nor in the categories of children's emotion, conduct, hyperactivity, peer problems, pro-social and total difficulties ($p > .05$).

Parent Evaluation of CiM

The participants filled out a ‘Parent Evaluation Questionnaire’ at the completion of the second session of the CiM programme. As shown in Table 3, CiM was perceived as worthwhile to the vast majority of parents, providing understanding of the Family Court, of the effects of separation on children, and of ways to help children through the separation process. By considering “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses together it can be seen that all participants thought CiM “worthwhile”, and over 90% thought the programme should be mandatory for all separated parents, that the programme was helpful (in various ways) and 81% were more hopeful now about the future.

Table 3.
Parental Ratings of the CiM Programme (n = 76)

| To what extent did you think: | Strongly Disagree % | Disagree % | Agree % | Strongly Agree ¹ % |
|---|------------------------|---------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| CiM was worthwhile? | - | - | 46 | 54 |
| You would recommend CiM to others? | 1 | - | 35 | 64 |
| Attendance should be required of all separated parents? | 3 | 4 | | 29 64 |
| The information would help you and your children? | 1 | 4 | | 47 47 |
| The information was presented in an interesting way? | 4 | - | 57 | 39 |
| CiM helped you understand how the Family Court works? | 1 | - | 53 | 45 |
| CiM helped you understand how separation affects children? | 3 | 1 | | 43 53 |
| The information would have a positive influence on decisions regarding your children? | - | 5 | 39 | 56 |
| You learned new ways to keep children out of conflict? | 1 | 9 | 45 | 45 |
| You feel more hopeful that things will get better? | 4 | 15 | 57 | 24 |

You are more likely to use alternatives to settle disputes (e.g., mediation)? 1 8 58 33

¹Four-point scale rating from (1) *strongly disagree* to (4) *strongly agree*.

Parental preferences for time and duration of the sessions: Seventy-one percent of the participants rated the length of CiM as being ‘just right’, over a quarter found it too short (26.3%) and a small minority rated it as too long (2.6%). The majority preferred week-day evenings (86%), with eight percent preferring week-day mornings and only three percent choosing week-day afternoons. Monday (57.4%), Tuesday (66.2%) and Thursday (63.2%) were the only days indicated as being preferred by the majority of participants.

Participant written comments: Opportunity was provided for the participants to give feedback to the developers of CiM in an open ‘comments’ area. This was used as part of a process evaluation, and enabled CiM to be altered to incorporate information supplied by participants. The comments were extremely varied. Those recommendations received from two or more participants included: to prevent people from dominating the discussion time (n = 2); to separate parents into groups related to the age of their children or to the length of time the parent had been separated (n = 3); to provide more practical tips (e.g., on problem solving, co-parenting guidelines or on how to help their children) (n = 3); to provide written information about the court system process (similar to the chart drawn on the whiteboard) (n = 3); to provide better facilities (including a more comfortable room) (n = 2); to provide CiM to people earlier in the separation process or preferably before separating (n = 2); to have people introduce themselves and say something about their situation (number of children and how long they have been separated) (n = 3) and to make CiM available in other areas of Auckland (n = 3). Ten people asked for more question or discussion time particularly to provide opportunity to ask personal questions and fourteen participants requested that CiM be extended to lengthier sessions or to include an extra session.

These comments were examined as they were received and where appropriate were used for continual improvement of the programme. For example, people introducing themselves at the beginning (first names and ages of children), greater facilitator control of dominating “talkers”, and inclusion of new material.

Feedback regarding group size and partner attendance: At the end of the semi-structured interview conducted with twenty participants two additional questions were asked to gain participants feedback

on specific issues. These are presented here as they were specific structured questions more akin to the quantitative section of the project. The first of these was asking for the participants' opinions on having larger group sizes (40 or more participants).

The majority of the participants (79%) disapproved of having larger sized groups. Comments typical of this group included:

“I'd much rather it was an interactive smaller group.”

“I just think people are quite fragile sometimes if it's quite early (after a separation) and I think perhaps lower numbers is a bit more personal”.

Sixteen percent of the respondents suggested combining a larger group with the benefit of smaller ones, by splitting the large group up during the session into smaller groups for discussion. They thought this would contribute to achieving the personal effect of being able to ask questions.

The second specific question, which was introduced part way through the interviews and therefore only addressed to 13 interviewees, concerned the possibility of having ex-partners in the same session. This brought up strong emotions with many responding with an emphatic “No”. Eighty-five percent were against the concept with reactions such as “No! Definitely not” typical. Reasons given included:

“No way because then the other person – even if they get on really well, there's stuff that someone might say that (the ex-partner) doesn't even know that there's a problem with that – that the ex has a problem with – sometimes you don't know that you've offended someone until they tell you one person might not be able to speak up and say that they're not comfortable with the other person there – that could cause problems outside.”

“Well in my case it wouldn't have worked – my ex-partner wouldn't have gone for a start and if they had, then you've got instead of a sharing time, you'll have a 'he said, she said, he said, she said' and I can't see it working. I honestly can't see that one working.”

One person in favour of the idea, stated “then at least you know they've heard it”. Another person suggested having sessions without ex-partners there but in addition having a shared session.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

While the quantitative research was useful for assessing changes in the knowledge and behaviour of the participants and their children, the interviews with selected participants and stakeholders for qualitative information added richness and depth to the data, enabling us to understand the meaning the participants attributed to their experience of attending CiM and of any changes that came as a result. A semi-structured format was chosen to allow rapport to develop between the researcher and the interviewee and to enable a broader and more in-depth range of information to be obtained from the interviewee's perspective by following their lead when issues were important to them (Smith & Osborne, 2003). Beginning with the actual interviews, the data was analysed inductively: This process involved close readings of the text, consideration of the multiple meanings that emerged out of the data, the allocation of patterns to categories that were combined to eventually form overall themes.

Overall Impressions of the CiM Programme

Positive impressions

The majority of the participants in this study (17 out of 20) were positive in their recollection of CiM. Typical comments included “oh it was fantastic, it really did help a lot”, “it was awesome”, “I think that it’s an excellent programme and can help a lot”, “I learned heaps!”, “Great! I’m really glad I did it. I found it very helpful”, “It was very good. It was very informative and balanced”, “ It’s very practical advice”, “It gave me the tools to put in to practice. I am definitely glad that I did it.”

Several people referred to it as an ‘eye-opener’ to the way children think and process what is happening between their parents. Many participants found it so beneficial that they recommended it to others.

“I felt as though I got a lot out of it personally myself in the fact that I’ve probably learned how to talk, rather than demanding, I’ve probably learned how to ask and that sort of thing. I’ve actually recommended somebody else to your course and they’ve just finished it and they thought it was wonderful.”

Negative impressions

Three out of the twenty did not find CiM useful, two of them had been separated for some time and been through the court process and the other found the message of CIM difficult as they had a non-co-operative ex-partner and experienced major difficulties throughout their separation process. However, all three described aspects of CiM that were either beneficial to them now or would have been when they first separated.

“Well it wasn’t really helpful. It would have helped me if I’d done it two years ago before I went all through the court proceeding ...I definitely think it should be a ‘must’ that it’s compulsory for people before they go through the court system.”

This participant reported “basically I felt as though I was just wasting my time. Yeah, so I’m a little bit – a couple of classes ahead of sort of.” However, he still found the question and discussion time valuable.

For another self-described “veteran of the court system” the written information did not appear to be of use.

“most of that knowledge that was in the forms that I’d seen it before through various reasons. I’m sure there might have been a few things but I can’t actually recall quite right now. But nothing that jumped out and bit me on the bum or anything. Very general(ly), if I wasn’t such an old dab hand at the family court and the court system, I would have found it very useful. Where I was at it didn’t help me a lot.”

On being asked what, if any, aspects of CiM were helpful for him he replied that it helped him to feel less isolated seeing others going through similar experiences (“seeing a couple of old veterans like myself there”). He could not think of any specifically unhelpful aspects of CiM but recommended getting both parents to attend early in their separation process to “circumvent prolonged anxiety for the children.”

A third participant in this category felt that the course was aimed at an unrealistic audience and in common with other participants, was frustrated that her partner was not prepared to change:

“it catered for a tiny minority of people that had a by-the-book separation which was a mutual agreement that their marriage wasn’t working out – let’s get counselling and see what’s the best way that we can do this that’s in the best interest of the family. There’s (only) a small group of people that it happens that way where they can actually do that...even if it’s good information, the other person doesn’t want to know – they have to hear from a third party. I mean it’s good information if both parents can do it.”

Timing of Parent Education

The relevance of the timing of the course was one of the most significant themes to emerge. Those that were contemplating separation, or had only recently separated, appeared to gain more benefit than those that had been separated longer, particularly if they had been through the court system. This also figured prominently in the ‘recommendations’ section below.

Recent or contemplating separation: “I thought it was very good actually. It was well worthwhile definitely. It would be different for different people and the different stages of what they’re going through. ... It was all sort of very new to me at that stage.”

“Yes, particularly at that stage I was sort of newly separated not knowing where to go and who to talk to – it was a real bonus to have something like that and how to deal with the children.”

Separated already for a period of time: “Yeah, it was good – it probably should have been done sooner rather than later in regarding that my divorce is almost through so it would have been more helpful to do it in the beginning of the legal process rather than near the end of it.”

Specific Themes

Children

Stability: Many participants realised for the first time that stability was important for their children. Parental learning included the importance of communicating with their children in an appropriate way what was happening and trying to keep their environment as normal as possible. One participant reflected on what she learnt from attending CiM as follows:

“Oh yeah, especially my oldest daughter, (separation) affected her more than the other two and she’s just come a huge way. You know she used to cry most nights when she went to bed and really pined for (her father) and now it’s not even an issue any more... I’ve been there for them constantly and I’ve kept you know, although we have moved, moved a couple of times because we felt the house, stay in the same area – I’ve kept continuity with schools and friends and after school activities and I’ve been – the children and I have been a constant unity throughout the whole thing and I think that kind of strengthens them.... (CiM) mentioned how important it was to sort of try and not to have too many huge changes in their lives. I mean the separation was kind of big enough and the least amount of changes with everything else would be better.”

Involvement: Interviewee’s reported they learnt the importance of both parents being involved with their children. One dramatic response from a participant revealed that he was planning to leave the country but CiM convinced him otherwise. When asked if he learnt anything new about what his children needed he replied:

“Um – stay in the same area – don’t run away. That was a big one for me. I was planning to go to Australia and get out of here....It was encouraging me to stay in the same area as my kids literally.”

He reported that his children had noticeably benefited from this.

Another respondent had thought he was doing best by letting his partner have the children and keeping a distance so as not to upset the children:

“well I wish I’d picked them up the day after and made sure I kept on seeing them – I thought the best thing to do was to step back.... I thought it was best not to interfere, but now I know that I should have stayed involved, that that is best for them as well as me, but I didn't know that early enough.”

Another father also found CiM gave him permission to be more involved in his children’s lives:

“Now that I know that it is good for them to see me regularly, I made sure that I am there for them after school when I can be....now that the arrangements are in place; there is more of a routine for them, they seem to be happier... I may have given up the battle for their custody, and then I wouldn’t be seeing them ... in fact at all, because my ex-partner stopped me from seeing them at all...I am really glad that I did the course, it helped me a lot”.

Similarly a mother commented:

“We got accommodation close by for my ex so that he could see my son more often because they (CIM presenters) said that the contact needs to be regular. I also learnt that the parents need to make arrangement for the child to talk to the other parent.... It would be easier to keep him away at the moment, but I learnt (at CiM) it was important for my son to keep seeing him and to talk to him regularly....Yeah, I made sure that he saw his father as much as he wanted to, and just making sure that his father was available.”

Preventing children from being exposed to conflict: On being asked if CiM had been of any use to them in dealing with their children, many for the first time had become aware of the possible negative effects on children of conflict and other undesirable parental behaviour. With over three-quarters of the interviewee’s making comments on this topic, it appeared to be a dominant theme in the research interviews and obviously reflected a dominant message of the CIM programme. Parents reported learning to refrain from talking negatively about the other parent or to show anger toward him/her in front of their children, not to put the CiM of their disputes or to communicate through their children, and to be more amicable with their ex-partner for the sake of their children. Many parents

acknowledged that they realised for the first time, that their children view themselves as part of the other parent also, and therefore take personally any negative comments about the other parent. The following reply is typical of the sentiment expressed by many participants:

“Yes, I found myself never anymore talking bad in front of the kids, you know regarding her. I’m not saying – I can’t say bad – bad is not the right word but I will be mad because of the whole situation and then without thinking start asking silly questions about what your mother did today or who’s she with and stuff like that.”

Many hadn’t realised the difficulties it caused their children when they were curious about their ex-partners private life:

“ I felt as though, maybe I was asking my children what I thought was indirect questions about what was happening and really it was actually harming them the way I was probably asking the questions.”

One participant had found the conflict message to be most important. Her former partner had also attended CiM and so both had been able to make behavioural changes to avoid conflict in front of their children:

“When you can deal with a partner in an amicable way, the children actually see that and they feel a lot more settled. They feel better about the parents getting on, obviously, so that was a huge thing – the conflict.”

Many parents described making changes in the way that they communicated with their ex-partner in order to prevent their children being exposed to conflict. Consequently they had noticed that their children were not getting as stressed or anxious as they had been previously. There was a real sense of children benefiting as a result of the changes their parents were making:

“Yeah, I think they’re probably not getting uptight about things they would have got uptight about before. They feel like they had to make decisions which they didn’t make in the end anyway... I mean they felt – well mum really used them as an advocate for me, you know, try

and convince me to change my mind about the whole thing and now they're not having to do that so it's taken a lot of pressure off them."

"They are (now) more comfortable to talk to me. It's okay Mum and Dad aren't going to get together because we don't actually see each other. For picking up I don't see him when I pick up the children. I think they feel more comfortable with that. Dropping off, we drop off in the driveway but my husband comes with me and he (ex-partner) doesn't come outside. I think the children are really comfortable about the fact that we're not arguing. We don't have to see each other so that they don't feel – like another thing, when it's time to go home, the children aren't getting uptight. It's okay to go home."

"I'm much more conscious of what I'm saying to them as I reply to their questions. I am always positive about their father than actually what I think about him and about other members of his family and that sort of thing"

"I guess too (as a result of attending CiM) I'm just trying to see the other person's point of view a bit more too. Be a bit more aware of them being at a different place in the healing process ... I notice that as long as I am calm and do not argue with my ex-partner that they (the children) are happier. They can cope with most things as long as I don't argue. (I need to be) very positive – that's very clear with them. As long as we don't fight or argue or keep them away from it then they're quite happy....As soon as any conflict arises or I raise my voice or if I happened to, in the past, make a sling-off comment, it really upset them."

Specific information that was highlighted as being useful for the CiM interviewee's, particularly in dealing with their ex-partner, included: ensuring children could not hear phone calls between their parents ("they can overhear things.... and, you know, they really do have ears and eyes open all the time"); communicating through e-mail or through a notebook, doing changeovers in a neutral place such as school, negotiating regular times for visits and telephone calls, and looking for more appropriate ways for dealing with ones anger toward the other parent.

"We both try not to discuss things on the phone or whatever in front of our son and that we do a drop off and pick up using the school as a mediator which I don't think the lawyers thought was the best idea but actually it works out really well because our son has time just to calm down,

get into another part of the day, not think about the long weekend he's had with his Dad and then come back all hyped up and tired with me. Actually, for me, it works really, really well.... things have settled down anyway.”

Reassurance that, if the separation was managed properly, their children were likely to be ok: Over half of the participants (11) spoke of gaining reassurance or reinforcement from attending CiM. They may have read or known the information from other means, but from hearing the information in this context, they gained confidence and authority to continue what they were already doing right. For others, it gave hope that with some changes, the situation for their children could be improved and the future was likely to be more positive:

“For a start it gave me peace of mind not hurting my son by his parents being separated. I almost cried with relief to hear that! It was huge, it gave me so much confidence. Secondly I feel better, more confident about telling about what is happening .. The most far-reaching (benefit) is the knowledge that if I do the correct thing then in the long term he (child) will be all right.”

“The whole course just reinforced that what I was doing was right and that the children would (be) fine with the help of me and [ex-partner] together. If we cooperate the children would be fine which they are.

One parent spoke of CiM providing “a good logical framework, practical framework. It helped me work out how I should react” and he found this reaffirming. Another found that giving his ex-partner the CIM literature provided authority to what he was suggesting for the children and that she was more likely to co-operate. Others spoke of the increased confidence and reassurance provided through hearing other people's difficulties and realising that they are not alone in their own struggles and that people do get through it.

Priority of the children: Another strong theme to emerge was the need to make children the priority: “It seemed to me that everybody going held the same view – in other words everybody was of the view that the children should come first.”

One participant reported that “the biggest change and it’s not just been with the ‘CiM Programme’ but that has been a help – is for me to really take to heart the idea of what’s in the children’s best interest.” Attending CIM had helped him to realise that he had needed to change his attitude. He gave the example that if his ex-partner wanted to attend their children’s gymnastics sessions when it was his turn to care for the children, he would have been annoyed that she was interrupting his parent-time “it’s all very me, me, me.” Now that he is attempting to put his children first he thinks:

“if the children (need) their parents to be at their gymnastics to watch them, then they’re entitled to that. They should be allowed to ask for that and have that if they want to – to have both parents if that’s what good for them.” Since CiM – based on what I’ve learned from CiM and I’m not being specific – but also based on all of the things that have been happening – the children are looking much more happy and much more confident and comfortable with both parents ... happier, as in more often jumping around laughing and being relaxed and then confident – comfortable speaking so my daughter is not afraid to say to me ‘Dad I prefer if something, something, something – I’d prefer if you didn’t do that’. Very much more respectful and actually helping each other.”

Some people have found that they needed to reassess how they viewed their children as some had been expecting them to act like adults, and CiM gave them a timely reminder to put the children’s developmental needs first and allow them to just ‘be children’.

Information regarding children’s ages: Participants spoke of information regarding the age and stage of their children as being useful:

“Yes, it was good in providing a differentiation between the different age groups, for example, the younger children need to have contact more often. Whereas, this is less important for the older child. And that is what we are doing, I see the younger children more often; the older girl has more of a life of her own, with her friends. ...We changed the regularity of the contact to match the age of the child.”

Although the course content does cover every age group, sometimes questions of particular participants relating to a specific age group dominated discussion and occasionally this became a negative point for those whose children were not in that age group.

Family Court information

A major theme that emerged as new knowledge for the parents was that they retained more control, and it was ultimately better for their children, if they avoided going further along the Family Court process. Most had no experience with legal systems and many thought that going through court meant going in front of a judge and were surprised to hear only 3–6% ended up in a hearing with a judge. Since time had lapsed (up to six months) between the interviewee's attending CiM and being interviewed for this project, it was possible to see that parents had put actions in place based on the information learned in CiM.

One participant outlined how she was able to go to her ex-partner, explain the court process as given in CIM and arrange a separation agreement:

“Yes, (I learned) that you can actually do it yourself and not have to go to lawyers – that obviously (is) like the last resort which you would hope to avoid....Yeah, I told him a bit about Family Court and how we didn't want to go there. I learned about that and could tell him about that and how we needed to do it ourselves. We didn't need to have everyone else help us, just do it ourselves and that was quite good. And also the lawyer – we can sort that out hopefully and with the care of the children and that we didn't have to have anyone's help – we just did it ourselves because we knew we could do it – have it written down which I learned from the course.”

One couple that had separated and had started on the court process but have since reconciled found: “We nearly came to a judge but we decided to sit and talk and find solutions without going through lawyers and Family Court because you can actually see that it can be done without going through lawyers and everything.” However, they commented that they had expected more help with couples that may want to explore reconciliation, as CiM seemed to be specifically for those who have no chance of getting back together.

Another parent was motivated to change her approach because of what she learnt about the court process:

“I think it has made me, in my own decision making, I wouldn’t want to have to go through that process, I’d rather be in charge of making decisions myself so it forces me to be more amicable with my partner....I think I look at the bigger picture differently. If I don’t sort this out with my partner, it will have to go to court and I don’t want that. I think I deal better with the children. I know what my options are so therefore I suppose I feel a bit safer in terms of knowing what my options are and what would happen if I took a particular route. It’s much easier to make a decision.”

Some found it did give them confidence in knowing what to be aware of as they went in to the legal process. When asked what he had learnt from attending CiM this participant replied:

“Well I guess for me it enabled me to go down the court pathway more confidently because I know what’s involved and know that that’s now the only option... but I think – because I think that a lot of the damage is done already so I think the earlier people attend, the better.”

Another stated that he was reassured that the children would be looked after:

“I was happy to know that the kids would be treated with respect, that they would be looked after by the court, therefore I was happy to proceed with the court system. I had been going to give up on my children, because my ex-wife wanted custody and I didn’t want to put them through anything that would harm them. So CiM helped me with that.”

As mentioned before, some participants had already been through the legal system and did not gain new information from CiM. Some of who appeared to have negative experiences that did not correspond to the message being proposed by the facilitators. This particularly applied when the other parent did not share the same direction:

“ No, I’ve got gold stars everywhere. I’ve bent over backwards and I’ve still had to go through court. I’ve been dragged through court and it’s cost me thousands and thousands of dollars. She hasn’t had to pay a cent which makes me violently ill.”

Another spoke of the other parent changing his/her mind about custody over four times, putting the whole family through upheaval. Others had related gripes such as negative experiences with ineffective ‘counsel-for-child’ or frustrations over the child-support payment system.

Others had no intention of getting involved in the court process, and being reasonably amicable with their former partner, found this section irrelevant, even rating it as least helpful in the CIM programme. One participant reported that she and her ex-partner “were reasonably amicable about how we were doing things so we weren’t going down that avenue anyway”, while others thought it might be useful information for the future as summarised by this parent:

“it’s good to know about the system and I mean, you never know – it might not have been applicable to us now but over the years things might change and new people might come into his life or he might re-partner and have more children and you don’t know what the future holds so you do need to be aware of the system and what help there is out there if you can’t sort things out between you.”

Process

Presenters

Several participants commented on the effectiveness of the presenters, particularly with regard to their knowledge, first-hand experience, and ability to present the information in a straight-forward manner:

“It was really good to talk to people in the industry, you know, the lawyer and the counsellor. It quelled my apprehension on the effects of separation on the children”.

Handouts

The written information sheets were mentioned as being helpful :

“I do look at it (the sheet) a lot actually.”

“I think I was more than happy with it. There were good handouts, you know, there was good recommendations in terms of books.”

Video

Several interviewees commented they found the video component useful: “ It was really good watching the videos as well. The video that we saw – their changeover of the children that was good to see.” However, others did not. “To be frank I didn’t remember a video.” One person rated the video as the least helpful aspect of CiM “because that wasn’t a real situation – it was – parts of the video where there were people giving their personal experience was way more helpful than the reconstruction of what it might be like which you know.” This indicates that the quality of the video is important, with real-life people and scenarios depicted rather than acted ones.

Group discussion

When asked what they found most helpful many respondents rated group discussion as being most useful. This emerged as a key theme of the research and is also discussed in the ‘recommendations’ section. Firstly, the support was appreciated:

“Just all the information they talked about really. Listening to other people that have been through it and listening (hearing) that (they) have been going through the same thing that I was”.

“Yeah, and it’s nice, just to see the different people and the different ages and that you’re not alone out there and there are people often who are really struggling with dealing with the ex and the children”.

“I thought it was quite supportive having other people in the same situation in the group like that.”

“It was good listening to other parents talk. It even made me realise that my situation was not as bad as other peoples’ (laughs).”

This appreciation of the support even extended to the possibility of discussion and support outside of CiM:

“It would be nice to be able to maybe, given the opportunity, to pair up with people at a later date and say ‘hey look I’ll come and have coffee with you’ or something like that to talk to people who are maybe a little bit further through the process than yourself. I think that would

be quite good.Some of the stories – if you could sit and have a yarn to some other people with similar stories... it would be good to be able to get into little groups and encourage the people in the group to communicate with each other outside the group.”

Secondly, the information received from other group participants was also beneficial:

“ It was interesting to listen to other people’s questions that they put forward as well. When people give their personal experience and questions are asked and answered, you’d be amazed at how many other people that helps. Do you know what I mean, even if it’s not exactly the same – there’s something about the situation you can relate to.”

However, not every parent had found this aspect helpful. One parent explained:

“It was a pretty full on time, there wasn’t a lot of time left for discussion. Then a lot of us would have delved off into their particular stories and that wasn’t what it was for and I think that needs to be made clear – this is not about your story. This is about a particular process and how it works.”

Participant Recommendations

Participants were asked specifically if they had any recommendations for programme change and improvements.

1. Different groups for different circumstances

There is a difference in what people require from CiM according to type of care they have of their children, their experience with the Family Court and the stage along the separation process. Some respondents felt that these should be separated out:

“There needs to be a separation between people who have regular contact with their children and those who don't ever see them. It would have been more helpful if they had sessions for people who don't have contact with their children.”

Another spoke of the different requirements for those starting out, stating that many need to know basic information.

“Firstly, how to deal with the maintenance issue: how to go about it, the implications for the ex-partner, etc. Yeah, how to go about it and still avoid conflict. Information on the Child Support System, that seemed to be missing.”

Another found that the group dynamics were negatively affected by incorporating those who had had difficulties with their separation:

“Some of the group participation was a little unhelpful. Like I said it would have been better if those that were newly in the legal, divorced, separation process were separated from those that had been in it for a while. That was like very into their story that was very despondent.”

The comment was often made that the focus of CiM was not on children of the interviewee’s children’s age. Several respondents recommended that programmes specifically for the parents of certain ages would be more beneficial.

“Some of the information was useful, the videos and things but actually a lot of it didn’t really apply because the children were younger than 6 and 4 – it was a while ago and because my children are so young, a lot of that wasn’t really applicable to me in my circumstances. I know the course was trying to be as generalised as possible but it mainly related to slightly older children that would have a little bit more independence.”

2. Compulsory attendance

Another theme that emerged was the opinion that others contemplating or already engaged in the separation process, should attend CiM. Over a quarter of the respondents spontaneously stated that CiM should be mandatory/compulsory:

“ (It was) really, really valuable. I think that it should be a prerequisite before any separation agreement is done.”

“I thought it was really good. It was informative and I think it should be mandatory when people separate. That everyone should have to go through it before they go through any legal process.”

“I think that people should have to do it as part of their settlement process... I just know what other people have experienced and their partners have been very destructive and I think that can be avoided.”

One of the difficulties that participants often alluded to was that their partner had not attended CiM. Compulsory attendance was recommended by several participants to address this issue also.

3. Attend earlier in the separation process

As discussed above, a major theme of the interview feedback and also a major recommendation, was that the earlier in the separation process that a parent attended CiM, the more benefit they and their children would receive from it.

One participant had attended before separating and commented “That’s when, early on, that’s when you need all that information too.” Another who had separated just prior to attending the session stated: “Yes, particularly at that stage I was sort of newly separated not knowing where to go and who to talk to – it was a real bonus to have something like that and how to deal with the children.”

4. More discussion

One of the most common recommendations was of the value of group discussion. This incorporated more personal introductions. Many wanted more open discussion: “When people give their personal experience and questions are asked and answered, you’d be amazed at how many other people that helps.” One participant spoke of how supportive it could be to have a group of people in the same situation. Another stated:

“ I thought it would have been good to have more interaction between the people that were there to be able to use examples and sort of like a focus group thing...It would have been really good to find out how other people have dealt with stuff especially when you’re all at different stages and you could make use of what other people have been through rather than have to go through it ourselves.”

A limited amount of time was made available for participants to speak one-on-one with facilitators during the tea/refreshment break and after the completion of the evening's session. Many parents recommended that more time be made available for personal discussion:

“Maybe more time for one-on-one conversation with the lecturers so if you had anything to discuss with them. Bring up more things of the problem side not necessarily on how things should be for a normal family that break up – maybe deal with some of the ones that are not.”

5. Personal information from people who have experienced separation

Several people recommended incorporating feedback from people who have personally experienced separation:

“I think it would help, I don't know how possible it is, I think a video with direct interviews of kids or parents of experience.”

“You know, you can get someone who's been through a divorce and come out the other side and some kids that have been through it or some people who have been through as kids or something like that. So it's all good to get the theory written down – it would have meant so much more to have someone come and say ‘look I've been through a divorce, it was dah dah dah and the only thing I recommend is bang, bang bang – these are really important things.... it's almost something different or personal when you actually have a person there.”

This person did not think that video would substitute.

6. Other recommendations

Other recommendations made by the interviewees included the need for information on reconciliation to be made available in the content of CiM, information on unique situations (e.g., when there is no other parent, when alcohol or drugs are involved, when one partner is from a different culture), more polished presentation and better promotion of CiM. Many suggested that CiM should be longer to allow time for discussion, questions or just to allow the information “to sink in.”

CHAPTER FIVE: KEY STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Analysis

Beginning with the actual stakeholder interviews, the data was analysed inductively and this process continued with close readings of the text and consideration of the multiple meanings that emerged out of the data to form patterns and themes (Thomas, 2004). These were manually coded and compiled.

Themes

Overall impressions were positive

All stakeholders were positive in their feedback on the CIM programme. Comments typical of the counsellors were:

“I think it’s really, really excellent and it’s great to have it there as a resource to refer people on to.”

“I thought it was interactive and a lot of information – very good information given.”

“I do think it is a really good programme and I do think that longer term it is going to make a difference. Keep it up!”

Specific feedback included:

“I think it is really good that it is on two evenings. I think they get good handouts.”

The lawyers also spoke of CiM as being a good idea, a very well-run programme, and very beneficial for the clients they have referred:

“I was impressed with it’s objectivity; I was impressed with the way it was set up, there’s a lot of protocols that have been put in place which are good, for example, that people don’t attend together. I thought that was a good step and the emphasis in CiM to do with the children as

opposed to the parents. It comes from quite a good angle; plus the fact that a psychologist and a lawyer are articulated in position so that people who attend get a couple of perspectives.”

“I think I can say it’s invaluable because it provides something different where, if people are prepared to go along, the whole focus and the whole flavour of what is being talked about is coming at a perspective which we know is to do with the children, but it’s the first time that parents hear it from different perspectives; not just from the legal but from the psychological and I think that it does – it strikes a chord. I believe it strikes a chord with people just for that reason.”

While not all stakeholders received feedback from clients and professional colleagues (one lawyer stated he received feedback from 50-60% of clients he referred), of those that did, the feedback was almost unanimous that CiM was at the very least, beneficial to their clients, if not as one counsellor put it, “extremely positive”. Typical comments heard in the field included:

“Couples are much better to handle when they have done CiM. You feel like you’re sort of half way there and so you’re really getting to address the issues very clearly”.

The Family Court Coordinator appeared to be in more of a position to receive feedback and again this was very positive:

“I can honestly say with all the people I have spoken to – clients and professionals alike, I have not had one negative comment that it was a waste of time or that it was pointless or – I’ve just heard really positive comments from people who feel as though they’ve got a handle on it now. ... People have said ‘oh I feel so good having gone to CiM – I fell like, well I don’t know it all but I have a reasonable understanding now’.”

A counsellor reported receiving positive feedback on a number of levels: As a form of support (hearing other’s perspectives); as good information including the legal perspective; and on a practical level, CiM “was well run, it was informative and it was really worth the time to attend.” Two lawyers reported:

“A lot of people have come away saying that they understand the system and how it operates better than before.”

“I don’t think that there is anyone that hasn’t said how good it was and haven’t got benefit from it.”

One counsellor had a client who did not feel it was of use to her personally. This person has a number of personal and family difficulties, and had a protection order taken out against her, which meant that a lot of the content was not of current use to her. Another client was not able to access the programme due to being a shift-worker. Similarly, two negative comments received from the lawyers were that the time of CiM was difficult for the occasional client and that some may be reluctant to attend from embarrassment that they might be ‘branded’ as not doing a good job in bringing up their children.

Increased child focus: The majority spoke of the parents being more child-focused once they had attended CiM. The parents had been encouraged to put their children first and had more of an understanding of what their children needed. It was noted that parents were more likely to talk to their children (not at) and involve them in a greater way. The Family Court Coordinator offered:

“I have spoken to people who’ve gone to CiM then come back home and they address their children’s issues ... so it’s enlarged the parents view ... (there is the) realization that parents may choose not to be together but they are mum and dad forever and they will share those children and the impact of squabbling or arguing, you know, negativity on the kids between parents is major”.

One counsellor was specific in the benefit to parents concerning their children:

“I think it helped them to see what the court required and expected of them, that regardless of their own issues that they needed to meet the needs of the children. They also became more aware of the fact that whereas some parents will withhold their children because the children were upset after access, they were able to talk about the fact that the children are upset really because of the conflict between the parents.”

Assists conciliation: Lawyers spoke of their clients being more conciliatory, less litigious:

“I think it has made them more conciliatory and more understanding of what it’s like being a separated parent and dealing with the other parent.”

“I think that they have possibly been a little less litigious in their approach and there’s been sort of more of an attempt to perhaps move towards trying to sit down with their, as much as I hate the word, ex and you know resolve the issue themselves.... I think that they’re less likely to want to engage in full-blooded hearings and things is the feeling I get.”

The parents tended to be better focused after attending CiM and more likely to try and communicate with their ex-partner to resolve issues themselves. It was noticed that parents were often more understanding of their partner:

“We don’t particularly as lawyers, want to sit there having people slagging each other off and we’re hoping that we can help them to become constructive rather than destructive.”

One lawyer observed that as a result of attending CiM, parents tended to:

“engage their brain before they engage their mouth a little bit more. I think that it’s helped oil the wheels of communication between some rather intransigent parents a little bit better than even counselling has achieved.”

Counsellors too noted that the parents were more conciliatory:

“It’s actually helped a lot of people sort of defuse situations and certainly stopped things from getting worse for some people.”

It was also noted that CIM helps the parents in their grief process:

“I think it actually helps them work through that (the separation and grief process); it actually facilitates that process and that is a by-product but it’s really important one and it means they get to that point where the dust starts to settle and normal communications resume after they’ve split up. It brings (that) about quicker and that’s again really beneficial to the kids.”

Increased understanding of legal procedures: Working within the judicial system, the Family Court Coordinator supported the development of the CIM programme “I witness a lot of fear around the court process and people being ill informed about what they’re entering into and so I had a very firm belief that an educative programme such as CiM would address a lot of questions that I am commonly asked on the phone.”

Lawyers too can spend a considerable amount of time explaining legal procedures to their clients. For example, the difference between custody and access versus guardianship:

“I explain that at the first interview because often you’ll get a man coming and saying ‘I want joint custody’ and when it’s all broken down the reason he wants joint custody is because he thinks that custody is guardianship and often once you’ve explained that, they’ll go away and say ‘oh, okay I understand that’ you know.”

When clients attend CiM they hear this information from another perspective, providing reinforcement and greater understanding.

One of the contributions of CiM according to one counsellor was to promote change in the way parents perceive the Family Court:

“It’s not the enemy and maybe actually it’s possibly family friendly and wanting things to help out which is really important for men.”

The Family Court Coordinator stated that it helps to empower people to make their own decisions:

“The court system is here for people that need it, it’s here for those sticky cases – they are very hard to decide and they need an outside objective opinion – you know the judges certainly have lots of work to do but I think there are a lot of people who fall back on the system, not because they want to – they don’t know what their options are, they don’t know what else to do – they’ve just had a real break-down and they get stuck.”

One of the reservations of the feedback from one lawyer was that the people attending were more likely to be motivated as CiM was voluntary “i.e., more amenable to suggestions.”

Supports stakeholders work: All lawyers reported that CiM supported their own work with clients:

“It’s reinforcing what we’re trying to say to parents and not support their unrealistic and sometimes vengeful policy.”

With the emphasis on children, encouragement of parents to communicate and agree for the sake of the children it is reinforcing what lawyers are saying. CiM they find helps the people to focus on reaching agreement for the benefit of the children. They found it complementary in their work representing children, parents and guardianship proceedings, and in counsel-led mediations:

“We see people who are focused on the right thing, great – very positive and we will help them achieve an agreement and send them away happy rather than unhappy.”

Counsellors too found CIM complemented their work and was therefore a useful resource:

“It complements it and adds another dimension to it and I think that it’s really affirming for people to go to a group situation and see that there are other people juggling with the same difficulties.”

Some also reported that CIM provided the same message:

“(it) is not the separation that effects the children, it’s the way the conflict and the separation is handled.”

Counsellors sometimes provide parenting plans and other services and CIM reinforces this work by providing another format. Similar to the lawyers response, counsellors spoke of their work being easier as the parents were likely to be more receptive once they had attended CiM:

“People who have done CiM who have come to me are a little bit ... more ready to deal with each other in terms of negotiating stuff, you know, with the Section 10 referrals – custody, access, things like that – understanding the necessity of it – especially around the kids, in front of their kids.”

It was also acknowledged that being court-approved gave credibility to the message that both CiM and the counsellors were trying to convey:

“It’s not just coming from one person’s point of view, it’s actually coming from something that is sanctioned by the court, paid for by the court, etc. I think from that point of view it has quite a lot of influence.”

This particularly applied when extended families were involved in the separation and child-care process. A neutral perspective on matters impacting children appeared to hold more authority:

“I was glad to have an adjunct because sometimes when I’m talking to clients about children’s needs, etc., it’s easy to sort of say ‘well she’s got her opinion but my lawyer says’ and I think to be able to go to another neutral arena and hear some of the things is really helpful.”

The Family Court Coordinator felt that CiM supported the Family Court services and reciprocally, the services supported CiM.

Stakeholder Recommendations

All stakeholders interviewed were asked specifically what recommendations they had for change and improvements to the programme.

1. Compulsory attendance

Many of the respondents volunteered “I think that everyone should do that course” and all of them, when asked, were supportive of the idea because of the benefits that they had observed to their clients, the families, the courts, and to the success of their own work. Additionally, this would address the problem of one parent being keen to attend and make changes in their behaviour while the other parent refuses to attend:

“The key to the exercise is getting both people there I think.”

“It is an integral component of the (Family) Court where I feel it should be encouraged and shouldn’t be got rid of ... there’s provision in the Family Proceedings Act to make parties go to

counselling and they have to go. I would see it as – it could be done in conjunction with that at that early stage. Yes, I'd support that.”

They quoted their clients also as saying that “every parent should do the course.” One counsellor thought it needed to be compulsory as CIM dealt with misinformation, gave a platform for which views could be expressed and provided an informal support group. The counsellor felt that in tandem with counselling, the responsibility (to help the children through the separation) is rightfully put on to the parents.

However, one lawyer said that while the key to the success of his work is getting both parents to agree, the difficulty with one person attending CiM is that the other can still make things difficult for them and while he had no problem with CiM being made mandatory he wondered how effective that would be:

“What happens if a person says well ‘up your nose, I’m not going to do it anyway?’ There are no penalties in the current Act now, well there are, but they’re never enforced – penalties in relation to breaches of access – and I just think to myself well make it mandatory by all means but if they do – what are you going to do to them? Slap them over the wrist with a wet bus ticket?”

The problem with penalising them with not being able to access other services (e.g., counselling, mediation) is that it may result in the children and the other partner getting hurt:

“I don’t want to see a punitive aspect that cuts people out of the whole thrust of the Family Court because they didn’t get to stage one.”

Similarly, a counsellor stated that as much as she supported the idea she could see that it might alienate some people further – men in particular:

“My reservation is that for some men, unfortunately it would get their backs up. Again, they would see that as some sort of Family Court directive... it might sort of inflame things temporarily ...it might be counter-productive.”

2. Cultural perspective

Maori consultation revealed doubts that there is much engagement from the Maori population, that is, CiM is not reaching them. This would possibly improve if CIM was:

“A marae-based programme run by a Maori lawyer. On the other hand some Maori might not want whanau involvement, for example, traditions may restrict what they can say. The issue is further aggravated by the fact that Maori do not engage well in the court system anyway.”

3. Programmes more widely available

The stakeholders were all connected to the North Shore Court, so geographical limitations were generally not of concern for them as it had been for the participants, however one counsellor who worked in the north-Auckland area posited that travel was difficult for clients suggesting that a programme could be run in Albany or Orewa and the Family Court Coordinator reported that their had been inquiries about CiM from all over the country both from parents, lawyers and courts.

4. Daytime sessions available

One counsellor reported that having “occasional daytime” sessions could benefit clients with young children who had difficulties procuring a babysitter, as apparently this had been an issue with several of her clients. Some had babysat for each other to allow them to attend the evening sessions but this would not work for all clients. Another counsellor spoke of clients who worked shift-work so again the timing of the sessions were difficult for them and one of the lawyers had occasionally had clients that felt that the session time was too limited (not enough options for day and time).

5. Presentation

One counsellor who had observed CiM, suggested the need for more video breaks (a video segment for each topic addressed) and, similar to the participant feedback, suggested that CIM be more integrative although she acknowledged it was aimed more at giving information than being interactive. Ensuring competent presenters were involved was a recommendation of several stakeholders. The key, according to one counsellor, “is going to be to have really good facilitators with the X factor, you know, who can engage the clients”.

Another lawyer spoke of the issue of “quality control”. While he has the “utmost confidence” in the current presenters, if CiM was to be offered nationwide he was concerned that the quality of facilitation might not be upheld:

“It’s got to do with the ability to communicate on the right level for the people they’re talking to instead of – there are too many lawyers out there who talk in sections of the Act and talk in language which doesn’t communicate with people.”

6. Referral processes

Most of the respondents said that they had the CIM leaflets available on their desks, they usually did an introduction to it recommending CiM or sent it out to clients. Most gave the leaflet to everyone, although not to cases where violence or abuse was involved, CYPS cases, etc. Some counsellors did not bother if the couple were conciliatory already. One counselor only gave it to cases where there were differences of opinion, but decided to change this policy when hearing the feedback from people who had attended and gained benefit even when already amicable.

Counsellors said that they preferred their client to attend the group and counselling sessions concurrently so that the CIM material could be discussed in the counselling sessions. Those that had previously attended the counselling had no way of following up on issues raised, on a personal basis.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Quantitative analysis of the data generally shows an increase in parental knowledge of the impact of separation on children, and an improvement in their children's behaviour and well-being, with children displaying more settled behaviour. Both of these changes were maintained over the three to four months that this study relates to. Time alone did not cause difference as indicated by the lack of change observed in the wait-list control group. A reduction in parental conflict also became evident in the latter part of the data collection and improvement in conciliation was also revealed through parent and stakeholder interviews.

Participants reported a very high level of satisfaction with CiM. This was also affirmed by 17 out of 20 of the participants in the qualitative parent interviews and strongly endorsed by all seven key stakeholders interviewed. This qualitative information, gained from interviews with participants and stakeholders, enriched the knowledge gained from the larger study providing strong support for what is being achieved through CiM but also providing direction for the future.

The evaluation was organised according to four specific programme aims: an increase in parent knowledge, improvements in parent communications and reduced parent conflict, improved child behaviour, and participant satisfaction with the programme.

Increased parent knowledge: Consistent with overseas studies (e.g., Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996), both the quantitative and qualitative assessments revealed that after attending CiM the participants achieved a significant gain in knowledge about the impact of separation on children. This was also visible at the three to four month assessment and in the interviews approximately four to six months after the

participants had attended CiM. Directly after attending CiM, 96% indicated that it helped them as parents to understand how separation affected children. When interviewed, parents also spoke of this, and of the support and reassurance they received that they were heading in the right direction or that their children “will be fine”. It also gave them authority in their decision-making regarding the children. Parents appeared to benefit not only by gaining new knowledge, but also by learning steps they could put in place to minimise negative effects, tools and techniques to use, and a deeper-level change in attitude to the ex-partner for the benefit of their children. For example, feedback from after the session revealed many parents had learned new ways to keep children out of conflict (89%), and were more likely to use alternative means to settle disputes (88%).

The stakeholders also, noted that parents appeared to understand their children’s needs more, and appeared more willing to change their own behaviours, in order to meet those needs.

Changes in parent behaviour and communication to produce more effective interaction and a reduction in conflict: Parent relationships changed significantly in terms of attitudes toward each other as measured by the Acrimony Scale, from the time that data was collected shortly after attending CiM, to the next collection three to four months later. That is, parents reported less acrimony. It is possible that this was a result of the passage of time since separation rather than a specific impact of the programme. However, the group was heterogenous in terms of the length of relationships with their ex-partner (ranging from those that were currently separating to those separated nine years ago) and involvement in the Family Court (nil to several full hearings with the Family Court Judge).

The interview data supported the evidence from changes in the Acrimony Scale scores. Parents often reported they had chosen to work together for the sake of their children and to avoid losing control of decision-making through further court involvement. Specifically, as a result of attending CiM, it appeared that more parents choose now not to get involved in conflict with their ex-partner in front of their children, even where they still felt hostile toward the other parent. Parents reported they had ceased using their children to transfer information between parents, no longer questioned their children about the other parent’s behaviour, and/or made derogatory statements about the other parent to the children. Some now dropped the children off at a neutral venue (e.g., school) so that they did not risk exposing their children to parent conflict or tension.

Parents also spoke of realising that it was important to be involved in their children’s lives, despite relationship difficulties with the other parent, some making dramatic changes such as choosing to

remain in New Zealand, or move houses to be closer to their children. They spoke of stability as being something they tried to install as a result of attending CiM.

Improved child behaviour: Parent ratings of their children's behaviour on the SDQ revealed significant decreases in children's hyperactivity, emotional and total difficulties scores at two to four weeks following attendance at CiM, with the decreases in hyperactivity levels continuing through to three to four months. The SDQ measures rely on parent perception of children's behaviour and changes over time, therefore, recorded improvements of behaviour may not be a change in actual behaviour, but rather a reflection of increased confidence on the part of the parent. However, the interviews also supported an improvement in children's behaviour with parents often referring to their children as being more settled, happier, and not getting as 'uptight'. It was noted that children became more comfortable and settled when they were no longer exposed to their parents arguing. According to Cummings, Davies and Campbell (2004) children's hyperactivity is linked to parental conflict, so with these parents avoiding exposing their children to conflict, their children's behaviour was reflecting this change.

Satisfaction with the programme (parents and key stakeholders): Feedback taken from parents directly following CiM attendance showed high rates of approval, including all rating CiM as worthwhile. Interviews supported this feedback revealing that parents were impressed with what they learnt and were inspired to make changes in their parenting. Interviewees also spoke of the benefit of parental support ("you realise that you are not on your own") and from hearing other people's perspectives. The stakeholders were united in their approval of CiM and were impressed in the effectiveness of CiM to support them in their own work areas.

According to 93% of the parents who attended the sessions and all of the stakeholders interviewed about CIM based on what they have seen of CiM, there is benefit to be gained by making CiM compulsory for those with children who are considering separation or who are separated from their children's other parent (which is in agreement to surveys in USA on this question; Arbuthnot & Kramer, 1998; Kelly, 2000).

Further evidence for consumer satisfaction with CiM was that only four of the total parents entering the first session of the programme failed to attend the second session, and for at least one of these there was an explanation (a family bereavement) other than dissatisfaction with the programme.

Other changes: In addition to changes anticipated and stated in the programme aims, there was also evidence that some other changes took place as a result of CiM attendance. There was a strong suggestion greater willingness to seek conciliation on disputed matters. According to the interviews, parents heard the CiM message that the further down the court process they went, the less control they would have over decision-making. Many reported they had subsequently made a conscious decision to avoid the court process, choosing instead to “sort things out” themselves and to keep things as amicable as possible for the sake of the children. Further evidence for this was found in interviews with stakeholders, who reported the parents were “easier to deal with”, more conciliatory or co-operative and “more likely to sort things out themselves” as a result of attending CiM. One couple, who had initiated court involvement, decided to sit and talk through the separation themselves, and have since reconciled. Improved orientation to conciliation is consistent with the evidence for a reduction in parental conflict recorded on the Acrimony Scale.

Evidence from the interviews with parents suggests that those who were contemplating separation or were recently separated gained the most from CiM. Those that had been separated for several years or more, particularly if they had been through the Family Court process, appeared to gain least. Many of these interviewees commented that they would have received more benefit from CiM if they had attended earlier. However, for most, there was still benefit to be gained from hearing others’ perspectives, from the social support, or from gaining reassurance or direction for some aspect of the separation process that was still affecting their lives some years after the separation.

Several impediments to the impact of CiM were reported; including that one parent may make changes, but changes in the other parent may not follow. Several parents spoke of the difficulties they have when the other parent counteracts positive practices they were trying to implement. This was often used as an argument for compulsory attendance.

Limitations of this research

There were constraints in this current study that may have influenced the outcomes. Foremost of these is the degree to which the sample is representative of separated couples. The group was self-selected,

since attendance was voluntary. It is not known how many parents received information from the court but did not telephone to register for a group. It would have been interesting in the existing study to compare those receiving information to those who attended, particularly in light of the compulsory versus voluntary discussion.

With three exceptions, the group in the pilot programme did not have their partners involved (although some ex-partners attended subsequently). It is not known what the impact would be of both parents attending. It is reasonable to assume that this would lead to improved outcomes from those observed here.

A further limitation was from the number of dropouts from the evaluation process. Most parents (74 or 97%), completed the first questionnaire at the beginning of attending the first session, 58 (76%) completed and posted the second two to four weeks later and 46 (61%) completed the third three to six months later. Therefore data from 28 people was missing by the final assessment. Some had moved away, some sent their replies in too late to be accepted, others had life circumstances that prevented them from completing further questionnaires (ill health, stress from change in job or accommodation, overseas travel, etc.). Others did not complete questionnaires from the time they left CiM. There did not appear to be any demographical features that characterised the participants that dropped out.

Further complications with the quantitative measures were from differences in numbers completing the POQ, SDQ and Acrimony Scale, and differences in numbers at different times for reasons other than attrition as reported above. Those parents who had children under the age of 4 did not complete the SDQ questionnaire as it is not appropriate for this age group. Others were not able to fill out the Acrimony Scale because the majority of the scores depended on the parent having some form of contact with their ex-partner; this was not always the case. In addition, one person filled out a control set of questionnaires and the post-group and follow-up group of questionnaires but not the pre-group and another did not complete enough of the pre-group questionnaire to be counted as valid although they did complete other time periods.

The population was drawn from a particular region, that being the North Shore Court district. The North Shore Family Court serves a large urban area, and the rural area extending to the north (Wellsford and beyond). This area has a higher SES than the rest of NZ and is less multi-cultural than some others. It was not possible from this pilot to evaluate the benefit of parent education for people

from other socio-cultural areas and ethnicities. While it is acknowledged that within the wider community there will be a variety of subgroups that require CiM to be custom-designed to meet their requirements, this current study was developed to assess the effectiveness of CiM in the mainstream New Zealand context before being tailored to meet the needs of specific groups.

Future research

There is a possible bias in the data from reliance upon self/parent-report, as opposed to objective observation, of change. Sources for obtaining further information include assessment of re-litigation rates of the participants from actual court records, and actual behavioural observations of children (e.g., through direct observation, or through teacher-report). Future research might incorporate direct measurement of impact of parent education on improvement of conciliation between parents be conducted from Family Court records.

While the aim of CiM is to benefit children, children are not directly involved. Many parents indicated that their children needed direct help themselves and they didn't know where they could find this. A complementary programme addressing needs of the children directly, yet simultaneously being reinforced by their parents attending the adult programme, is worthy of exploration.

As there are requests for CiM to be made available in other parts of the country, research is required to adapt CiM to, and assess the impact of, CiM in other areas of NZ and with other cultural groups.

Finally, it is recommended that a more rigorous research design be employed, with a larger sample of participants, and incorporating a control group with random allocation to the parent programme and control group.

Conclusion

The evidence from this pilot programme is that parent education following separation provides a successful method of supporting parents to consider the best interests of their children in the post-separation transition, as suggested by and the Law Commission (Law Commission, 2003). Furthermore the results are consistent with the international literature as briefly reviewed in the introduction to this report. This report provides evidence for improvements in parenting, especially in regard to reduction in the exposure of children to conflict. Conflict has been isolated in previous research (e.g., Cumming et al., 2000; Grych, 2005, Kelly, 2000) as being of paramount importance for

children's well-being. The accompanying change in child behaviour reported in this study supports this. Evidence from interviews with parents and stakeholders suggested that as a result of attending CiM, parent communication improved, encouragement of child involvement with the other parent increased, and attitudes to conciliation improved.

CiM is designed as a preventative intervention and as such, enables parents to consider their children's needs more carefully and with greater knowledge, and to better negotiate arrangements for the care of their children in such a way as to decrease the risk of harm present in the parent separation and its aftermath. In the present study there is support for the wider implementation of parent education of the type piloted in association with the North Shore Family Court. There is also reason to consider whether such programmes should be mandatory (requiring legislative change as in USA and Canada). It is recommended that such wider implementation of parent education be considered in the context of developing other preventative and early intervention programmes such as programmes for children, and enhanced conciliation and mediation procedures for parents who remain in dispute.

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