

# EFFECTS OF SKILL-BASED VERSUS INFORMATION-BASED DIVORCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND PARENTAL COMMUNICATION

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*This study used a pre- and postevaluation with a control group to compare the effectiveness of two divorce education programs: skill-based Children in the Middle (CIM) and information-based Children First in Divorce (CFD). Each treatment group consisted of approximately 125 divorcing parents mandated to attend divorce education in Florida. The control group consisted of 64 divorcing parents not mandated to attend divorce education in Alabama for lack of a program. Treatment and control parents lived in comparable cities with comparable demographics. Results indicate that CIM, not CFD, improved parental communication. Both CIM and CFD reduced child exposure to parental conflict. Neither program had effects on domestic violence, actual parental conflict, or child behavior problems. Across all groups, parents with greater divorce knowledge and communication skills experienced more reciprocal discussions with the other parent, less parental conflict, less domestic violence, and they exposed children to less conflict.*

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Mounting evidence suggests that educational interventions for divorcing parents can enhance parents' understanding of their children's experience, parents' knowledge of effective postdivorce parenting practices, and parents' ability to communicate and cooperate effectively to reduce children's exposure to conflict (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b; Arbuthnot, Poole, & Gordon, 1996; Kramer, 1997; Kurkowski, 1996; Wolchik, West, Westover, & Sandler, 1993). There also is evidence indicating that programs have community-level impact. Arbuthnot, Kramer, and Gordon (1997) found that over a 2-year period, parents who had attended a program had relitigated over all issues (including custody, child support, and domestic violence) less than half as often as parents who had not attended a program and that relitigation rates were related to skills mastery. In addition, parents consistently report high

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client satisfaction with divorce education programs (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996a; Kramer & Washo, 1993; Petersen & Steinman, 1994).

Although recent evidence attests to the effectiveness of some divorce education programs, most programs have not been evaluated for effectiveness, and others have shown few or no effects (Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, & Trotter, 1992; Kramer & Washo, 1993; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). Careful empirical research is needed to determine which content, instructional strategies, and programmatic characteristics produce desired changes and which do not. In this study, we addressed two important professional issues facing divorce educators: the effects of divorce education on the incidence of domestic violence and the comparative outcomes of programs that are skill versus information based in content.

## **DIVORCE EDUCATION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

There is debate about the appropriateness of divorce education for couples who experience domestic violence. It is unclear whether interventions that promote parental communication and cooperation increase or decrease domestic violence (e.g., Hart, 1990). It has been estimated that 11% to 12% of men have been physically violent toward their wives, and 24% to 30% of women suffer from other forms of domestic abuse, including verbal threats, vicious criticism, unwanted monitoring of activities, destruction of property or pets, and financial control (Sun & Woods, 1989). Although evidence suggests that equivalent numbers of women and men commit violent acts against one another, the incidence of severe injury is substantially higher for women than for men (Cantos, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994). Domestic violence is believed not only to have harmful effects on women but also to have harmful effects on children (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989). Increasingly, California courts have been ruling against violent spouses, not only charging and sentencing them for direct spousal abuse but also for endangering the mental health of their children (National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, 1996).

Divorce education programs frequently are used to reduce parental conflict and facilitate both formal agreement programs such as mediation, and informal agreements such as deciding children's daily activities (e.g., doctor visits, clothing purchases). Although divorce education programs have been shown to reduce reported parental conflict (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b; Kramer & Washo, 1993) and relitigation rates (Arbuthnot et al., 1997), the impact of divorce education programs on domestic violence is not known. It

may be dangerous to encourage communication and cooperation if these behaviors lead to more frequent or more abusive confrontations.

In contrast, it is also possible that appropriate interventions by victims might break existing cycles of violence. For example, cycle theory (Walker, 1996) describes a three-stage cycle of domestic violence. First, tension builds between victim and abuser, and minor battering may occur. Second, severe battering occurs. Third, the abuser is apologetic and remorseful. In terms of cycle theory, divorce education programs might teach victims communication skills that serve to intervene in the first stage of the cycle, before serious violence occurs. A final possible outcome is based on a logical relationship between conflict and violence. According to this perspective, reductions in reported conflict logically would correspond to reductions in the frequency and severity of domestic violence.

## **DIVORCE EDUCATION PROGRAM CONTENT**

Divorce education programs vary in instructional strategies. Many are didactic, presenting a large amount of information in lecture format to large groups of parents. These programs often use videos to help parents see the divorce from the child's perspective. Others provide similar information but less of it, choosing to use the time available to focus more intensely on learning new skills and changing parenting behaviors. These also use videos, but the focus of the videos is on modeling new responses to problematic situations. There is a strong need for comparative evaluations of divorce education programs. Because many family courts operate with limited financial resources, court administrators must choose effective, low-cost programs. In addition, interventions are an intrusion into parents' private lives. To justify mandating attendance at a program, courts need clear evidence of the value and effectiveness of the program.

In this study, we compared Children in the Middle (CIM) (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b) and Children First in Divorce (CFD) (Fourth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida and Hope Haven Children's Clinic, 1995), which was adapted from Children Cope With Divorce (Families First, 1995). CIM and the program on which CFD is based probably are the most well-known and commonly used divorce education programs. CIM has a specific focus and is skill based. In this program, we assumed that individuals should learn specific skills for communicating and interacting with their ex-spouse to reduce the conflict to which their children are exposed. Outcome research on CIM (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b; Arbuthnot et al., 1997;

Kurkowski, 1996) has demonstrated that parents do learn communication and conflict-avoidance skills, these skills are maintained over time, and improvements in skills are related to reductions in conflict. Although parent checklists of child problems generally showed no change, children of divorce-educated parents experienced less parental conflict, reported better relationships with parents, and had fewer school absences and doctor visits. It remains an empirical question whether skill practice is achieved at the expense of providing additional valuable information to parents. Focusing on fewer themes, emphasizing appropriate parenting behaviors, encouraging active practice, and providing materials for future home practice may increase the effectiveness of CIM.

Conversely, CFD has a broad focus and is information based. CFD assumes that parents should learn large quantities of information about how divorce affects children and themselves, which they should use later to improve interactions with their ex-spouse. Such programs attempt to impart understanding and create attitude change rather than develop specific communication or cooperation skills. It is an empirical question whether this type of program may attempt to teach parents too much. If parents become overwhelmed with information, little information will be retained and parent satisfaction will decline. In addition, information in the absence of skills practice may not lead to behavior change. Although both CIM and CFD encourage general discussions, information-based CFD does not encourage as much involvement and active practice as does skill-based CIM.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants served in one of two treatment groups (either CIM or CFD) or in a control group. In total, the two treatment groups consisted of 607 parents (366 mothers and 241 fathers) mandated to attend divorce education in Jacksonville, Florida, within 30 days of filing for divorce. Of these parents, 329 were trained in CIM and 278 were trained in CFD. The court would not permit the usage of a no-treatment or waiting-list control group in Jacksonville. Because there were no other urban areas in Florida without a divorce education program, a control group was found in Alabama. The control group consisted of 208 parents (104 mothers and 104 fathers) divorcing in Birmingham but not attending divorce education for lack of a program. Several

criteria were used to select an appropriate control group, including similarity of region (urban, Southeast) and similarity of participant demographics (predominantly European American, ages 20 to 40, moderate socioeconomic status).

Treatment and control groups were proportionate in gender composition. No significant differences were detected in the proportion of mothers and fathers in each group before class or 3 months after class. Table 1 shows cell counts, means, and standard deviations of treatment and control groups for demographic variables. Measurement before class is labeled Time 1; measurement 3 months after class is labeled Time 3.

Average parent age was 33.79 years ( $SD = 7.11$ ). Racial composition was not significantly different among the three groups. For the entire sample, parents were 78.1% European American, 16.2% African American, and 5.7% other races, including Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. Education level was measured with a 6-point scale. Lower scores indicate less education (e.g., elementary or high school completed), whereas higher scores indicate more education (e.g., master's or doctorate completed). For the sample, mean education level was 2.60 ( $SD = .92$ ), indicating some college or technical degree completed. Socioeconomic status (SES) was measured with Hollingshead's 7-point scale. Lower scores indicate lower SES (e.g., unskilled and semiskilled workers), whereas higher scores indicate higher SES (e.g., semi-professionals and professionals). For the entire sample, mean SES was 3.11 ( $SD = 1.37$ ). This moderate rating includes jobs such as electrician, secretary, salesperson, and retail manager.

The average number of months since parental separation was 14.36 ( $SD = 9.16$ ). On average, parents had 1.90 children ( $SD = .97$ ). Parenting arrangement was measured with a 7-point scale, in which lower scores indicate more parent involvement and higher scores indicate less parent involvement. Parenting arrangement was significantly different for mothers ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) and fathers ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). Mothers reported that children spent more time with them, residing with their fathers 2 to 3 weekends per month. Fathers reported that children spent little time with them, residing with their mothers about 20 days per month.

For CIM, 138 of 329 parents completed all three surveys (Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3) for a response rate of 41.9%. For CFD, 114 of 278 parents completed all surveys for a response rate of 41.0%. Of the 208 control surveys that were mailed, 29 were undeliverable due to incorrect addresses. Of the 179 surveys that reached parents, 64 parents completed both surveys (Time 1 and Time 3) for a response rate of 35.8%.

Table 1  
*Cell Counts, Means, and Standard Deviations of Treatment and Control Groups for Demographic Variables*

Demographic Variable	CIM	CFD	Control
Mothers at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> )	194	172	55
Fathers at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> )	135	106	35
Mothers at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> )	80	77	40
Fathers at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> )	51	32	21
Age at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 664)			
<i>M</i>	34.52	33.05	33.45
<i>SD</i>	7.07	7.08	7.20
Age at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 299)			
<i>M</i>	34.82	33.13	33.49
<i>SD</i>	7.17	6.79	6.56
Race at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 583)			
<i>M</i>	1.36	1.27	1.28
<i>SD</i>	.74	.79	.70
Race at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 274)			
<i>M</i>	1.33	1.28	1.30
<i>SD</i>	.83	.94	.72
Education at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 662)			
<i>M</i>	2.60	2.54	2.88
<i>SD</i>	.94	.82	1.16
Education at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 298)			
<i>M</i>	2.75	2.51	2.90
<i>SD</i>	.95	.76	1.18
SES at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 643)			
<i>M</i>	3.10	3.13	3.09
<i>SD</i>	1.47	1.25	1.29
SES at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 292)			
<i>M</i>	3.33	3.16	3.16
<i>SD</i>	1.48	1.18	1.27
Months separated at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 643)			
<i>M</i>	14.57	14.10	14.39
<i>SD</i>	9.21	9.92	8.82
Months separated at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 291)			
<i>M</i>	13.16	14.48	14.75
<i>SD</i>	9.53	9.57	8.98
Number of children at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 656)			
<i>M</i>	1.90	1.83	1.77
<i>SD</i>	1.01	.97	.66
Number of children at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 293)			
<i>M</i>	1.81	1.83	1.80
<i>SD</i>	.97	1.16	.68
Parenting arrangement at Time 1 ( <i>n</i> = 654)			
<i>M</i>	3.43	3.27	3.20
<i>SD</i>	1.85	1.69	1.71
Parenting arrangement at Time 3 ( <i>n</i> = 296)			
<i>M</i>	3.10	3.02	3.10
<i>SD</i>	1.77	1.53	1.66

NOTE: CIM = Children in the Middle group; CFD = Children First in Divorce group; SES = Socioeconomic status. Cell counts of mothers and fathers may show small discrepancies with totals reported in the text because the designation of mother or father could not be determined on some surveys.

## PROGRAMS

Both programs consisted of one 3-hour session. CIM covered divorce information, communication skills, and parenting skills. Divorce information included effects of divorce on preschool, elementary school, and adolescent children; described the difficulties of single and long-distance parenting; and described how reduced conflict and high-quality parenting can improve child adjustment. In addition, CIM focused on specific parenting skills, such as keeping children out of the middle of parental conflict (e.g., children not carrying messages, parents not "putting down" the other parent, parents not involving children in money problems, and parents not using children to spy on the other parent). CIM also included training and practice in communication skills, including using nonthreatening "I" messages, discussing one topic at a time, and staying on the topic.

CFD covered the same divorce information as CIM but only mentioned the importance of communication and parenting skills, without training or practice in specific skills. Instead, CFD focused in greater detail than CIM on children's emotional reactions, parenting difficulties, building children's self-esteem, and developing parenting plans.

## DESIGN AND ANALYSES

A 3 (group)  $\times$  2 (parent)  $\times$  3 (measurement time) two-between one-within ANOVA design was used to examine changes in outcomes from 3 months before the program to 3 months after the program. Group consisted of three levels: CIM, CFD, and control. Parent consisted of two levels: mother and father. Because more mothers than fathers returned surveys, parent was treated as a between-subjects factor to maximize the number of data points. For treatment groups, measurement time consisted of three levels: Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3. Time 1 was before class, Time 2 was after class, and Time 3 was 3 months after class. At both classes, parents were surveyed on the following variables at Time 1: domestic violence, parental communication, parental conflict, child exposure to conflict, child behavior problems, and knowledge of divorce information and parenting skills. Also at both classes, parents were surveyed on the following variables at Time 2: expected parental conflict, expected child exposure to conflict, knowledge of divorce information and parenting skills, and parent reactions to the program. Follow-up surveys were mailed at Time 3. The control group was surveyed on all variables at two measurement times: Time 1 and Time 3. Time 1 and Time 3 for the control group temporally coincided with Time 1 and Time 3 for the

treatment groups, but the control group did not attend class. For all groups, parents made retrospective ratings at Time 1 for the previous 3 months and made ratings at Time 3 for the 3 months after class.

## PROCEDURE

Surveys were mailed to Hope Haven Children's Clinic in Jacksonville, the site of the program. Ten CIM classes and 10 CFD classes were held during November and December of 1996. Parents were randomly assigned to programs when they filed for divorce. Each class was instructed by two facilitators, one male and one female. Facilitators were screened by Hope Haven for appropriate education and experience. After each class, Time 1 and Time 2 surveys were mailed from Hope Haven to Ohio University for analysis. Names and addresses of parents were recorded on Time 1 surveys so that Time 3 surveys could be mailed to parents later from Ohio. Parents were informed that their cooperation was valuable for helping families of divorce and were offered \$5 to complete and return all three surveys. For the control group, surveys were mailed directly to divorcing parents residing within the jurisdiction of the 10th Circuit Court of Alabama, Birmingham Division. Control participants were informed that their cooperation was valuable and were offered a free booklet on improving parenting skills, *What About the Children: A Guide for Divorcing Parents* (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1994b), to complete and return both surveys. Control parents were offered an information intervention rather than a financial reward for reasons of professional responsibility. During the class, CIM parents received *What About the Children* and CFD parents received *Children First in Divorce: A Guide for Parents* (Fourth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida and Hope Haven's Children's Clinic, 1995), both of which describe the divorce process, child reactions, appropriate parent behaviors, and parenting plans. Thus, control parents were offered an informational reward for their participation that would be beneficial to both them and their children.

## MEASURES

Measures consisted of Likert-type rating scales assessing domestic violence, parental communication, parental conflict, child exposure to conflict, child behavior problems, parent knowledge of information and parenting skills, and parent reactions to the program. Some measures have been used previously in divorce education research, but others were developed for this study. To assess the frequency and severity of domestic violence, a five-item



scale was adapted from Newmark, Harrell, and Salem (1995), who developed their scale from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Strauss, 1979). For this study, internal consistency reliability was  $\alpha = .75$  at Time 1 and  $\alpha = .75$  at Time 3. The possible range of values for this scale was 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating more threats and actual acts of physical abuse, such as hitting, choking, and using weapons. To assess parental communication, a four-item scale was developed from Newmark et al., who originally developed their scale from the Marital Power and Decision-Making Scale (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). For the current study, reliability was  $\alpha = .68$  at Time 1 and  $\alpha = .65$  at Time 3. The possible range of values for this scale was 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating more reciprocal nonconflictful discussion.

To measure parental conflict, a five-item scale was developed from Newmark et al. (1995). This scale originally was based on divorce mediation screening instruments from Hawaii and Phoenix, Arizona. For the present sample, internal consistency reliability was  $\alpha = .83$  at Time 1 and  $\alpha = .86$  at Time 3. The possible range of values for this scale was 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating more frequent verbal disputes over child rearing and financial issues. To assess child exposure to conflict, a nine-item scale was adapted from a prior study (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b). For the present sample, reliability was  $\alpha = .63$  at Time 1,  $\alpha = .64$  at Time 2, and  $\alpha = .64$  at Time 3. The possible range of values for this scale was 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating that children witnessed less conflict between parents and less frequently were put in the middle of disputes. Following the parental conflict and child exposure to conflict scales, two items assessed parent satisfaction with changes in their behavior from Time 1 to Time 3. The first item assessed how satisfied parents were with changes in parental conflict. The second item assessed how satisfied parents were with changes in child exposure to conflict. Both scales ranged from 1 to 5, with lower scores indicating more satisfaction.

Child behavior problems were assessed with the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory. The Eyberg inventory has demonstrated test-retest reliability of .86, internal consistency estimates of  $\alpha = .92$ , and has discriminated between problem and nonproblem children (Eyberg & Ross, 1978; Robinson, Eyberg, & Ross, 1980). For this study, internal consistency was  $\alpha = .95$  at Time 1 and  $\alpha = .95$  at Time 3 for the Eyberg intensity score, and  $\alpha = .94$  at Time 1 and  $\alpha = .95$  at Time 3 for the Eyberg problem score. The potential range on the Eyberg Intensity Scale was 36 to 252, with higher scores indicating more frequent child behavior problems, such as disobedience, lying, and fighting. The potential range on the Eyberg Problem Scale was 0 to 36, with higher scores indicating that child behaviors were more difficult for parents to manage.

Parent knowledge of divorce information was assessed with eight true or false items, and parenting skills were assessed with two open-ended questions, all of which covered material presented in both programs. True or false items were adapted from the Knowledge of Impact of Divorce (KID) Scale (Gordon & Arbuthnot, 1991). The range of possible values for the true or false scale was 0 to 8, with higher scores indicating more knowledge. Open-ended parenting skill questions contained a short scenario about a child returning from the other parent's home followed by two questions, one asking what the parent would say and one asking what the parent would do in the situation (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b). The range of values was 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more appropriate parental responses. Two research assistants individually coded responses. Interrater agreement was excellent at Time 1 and Time 3. Kappa ranged from .85 to .95; therefore, the mean of the two raters was used for analysis. Finally, participant reactions to the program were assessed with a four-item scale asking overall satisfaction with the program, usefulness of the program, whether the class taught skills, and whether the amount of information presented was appropriate. Internal consistency reliability was  $\alpha = .87$  at Time 2 and  $\alpha = .81$  at Time 3. The range of values was 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating more positive reactions.

## RESULTS

### PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

Group  $\times$  Parent  $\times$  Respond/Nonrespond ANOVAs were conducted for all surveys on Time 1 variables to assess differences between responders and nonresponders. Analyses of variance showed that no responder differences existed in parent age, parent education level, months since parental separation, or number of children. Chi-square analysis showed that no responder differences existed in parent race. Lack of differences held true across the CIM group, CFD group, and control group on all demographic variables except parent age. Although parent age was significantly different between CIM ( $M = 34.52$ ), CFD ( $M = 33.05$ ), and control ( $M = 33.45$ ) ( $F(2, 658) = 3.26, p < .05$ ), this small difference has little practical significance. Responder differences existed in SES ( $F(1, 637) = 5.34, p < .05$ ) and parenting arrangement ( $F(1, 648) = 12.76, p < .01$ ). It was expected that responders ( $M = 3.24$ ) would have a higher SES than nonresponders ( $M = 3.01$ ). More educated, motivated individuals are more likely to complete surveys than are less educated, less motivated individuals. It also was expected that responders

( $M = 3.03$ ) would spend more time with their children than nonresponders ( $M = 3.56$ ). Primary caregivers are more involved with their children and seem more likely to complete surveys about their children than less involved caregivers.

As for dependent variables, analyses of variance showed no responder differences in domestic violence, parental communication, parental conflict, child behavior problems, or parent knowledge. The only significant difference between responders and nonresponders on dependent variables was child exposure to conflict ( $F(1, 614) = 5.38, p < .05$ ). Responders ( $M = 36.94$ ) exposed children to more parental conflict than nonresponders ( $M = 38.20$ ). In general, responders and nonresponders were highly similar (only 3 of 17 variables were significantly different). A representative sample and external validity were reasonably ensured.

## PRIMARY ANALYSES

Rates of domestic violence were not affected by either divorce education program. The main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 288) = 4.27, p < .01$ ), indicating that CIM, CFD, and control parents differed in domestic violence scores equally across time. Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) tests showed that control parents experienced significantly more domestic violence than did CIM or CFD groups, which did not differ from each other. The main effect of measurement time was significant ( $F(1, 288) = 15.22, p < .01$ ), indicating that domestic violence scores decreased from Time 1 to Time 3 across all groups. The main effect of parent was not significant. Nonetheless, an analysis including only mothers was conducted. Means,  $F$  ratios, and significance levels were almost identical to those of mothers and fathers together. Overall, this analysis shows that divorce education, regardless of program, does not increase or decrease domestic violence. It also shows that all groups report decreased domestic violence over time, probably due to normal postdivorce anger reduction or "cooling off" among parents. Means and standard deviations for significant relationships are listed in Table 2. ANOVA tables for significant relationships are shown in Table 3. Figure 1 shows graphed means of the domestic violence ANOVA.

Because of the greater skill focus of CIM, it was expected that parental communication would improve most in the CIM group, improve less in the CFD group, and change least in the control group. This prediction was largely confirmed. The main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 282) = 7.04, p < .01$ ), indicating that CIM, CFD, and control parents differed in parental communication scores. The main effect of parent was significant ( $F(1, 282) = 26.20, p < .01$ ),

Table 2  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Significant Relationships*

Dependent Variable	Pre	Post	3-Month Post
Domestic violence			
CIM ( <i>n</i> = 128)			
<i>M</i>	8.41	—	7.38
<i>SD</i>	3.89	—	2.83
CFD ( <i>n</i> = 105)			
<i>M</i>	8.64	—	7.76
<i>SD</i>	3.38	—	3.57
Control ( <i>n</i> = 61)			
<i>M</i>	9.87	—	9.13
<i>SD</i>	4.87	—	4.13
Parental communication			
CIM: Mother ( <i>n</i> = 74)			
<i>M</i>	16.73	—	17.51
<i>SD</i>	3.06	—	2.78
CIM: Father ( <i>n</i> = 51)			
<i>M</i>	15.53	—	16.12
<i>SD</i>	2.39	—	2.46
CFD: Mother ( <i>n</i> = 73)			
<i>M</i>	16.74	—	17.37
<i>SD</i>	3.04	—	2.87
CFD: Father ( <i>n</i> = 29)			
<i>M</i>	16.41	—	16.55
<i>SD</i>	2.35	—	3.30
Control: Mother ( <i>n</i> = 41)			
<i>M</i>	16.39	—	16.32
<i>SD</i>	2.22	—	2.91
Control: Father ( <i>n</i> = 20)			
<i>M</i>	13.55	—	13.10
<i>SD</i>	4.07	—	4.05
Child exposure to conflict			
CIM ( <i>n</i> = 115)			
<i>M</i>	37.28	40.61	38.48
<i>SD</i>	4.59	3.59	3.87
CFD ( <i>n</i> = 95)			
<i>M</i>	37.41	40.78	38.84
<i>SD</i>	4.24	3.21	3.78
Control ( <i>n</i> = 61)			
<i>M</i>	35.49	—	35.43
<i>SD</i>	5.66	—	5.45

indicating that mothers and fathers differed in parental communication. The Group  $\times$  Parent interaction was significant ( $F(2, 282) = 3.20, p < .05$ ). HSD

Table 3  
Significant ANOVA Source Tables

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F
Domestic violence				
Group	193.24	2	96.62	4.27**
Parent	15.16	1	15.16	.67
Group $\times$ Parent	.25	2	.13	.01
Within cells	6,518.66	288	22.63	
Time	70.90	1	70.90	15.22**
Group $\times$ Time	1.81	2	.90	.19
Parent $\times$ Time	13.37	1	13.37	2.85
Group $\times$ Parent $\times$ Time	1.28	2	.64	.14
Within cells	1,350.22	288	4.69	
Parental communication				
Group	201.08	2	100.54	7.04**
Parent	374.42	1	374.42	26.20**
Group $\times$ Parent	108.74	2	54.37	3.20*
Within cells	4,030.20	282	14.29	
Time	1.22	1	1.22	.41
Group $\times$ Time	19.57	2	9.78	3.26*
Parent $\times$ Time	.01	1	.01	.00
Group $\times$ Parent $\times$ Time	5.24	2	2.62	.87
Within cells	845.54	282	3.00	
Child exposure to conflict				
Group	707.32	2	353.66	10.64**
Parent	106.63	1	106.63	3.21
Group $\times$ Parent	135.99	2	67.99	2.05
Within cells	8,088.39	265	33.24	
Time	87.36	1	87.36	13.05**
Group $\times$ Time	57.78	2	28.89	4.03*
Parent $\times$ Time	9.77	1	9.77	1.46
Group $\times$ Parent $\times$ Time	.11	2	.06	.01
Within cells	1,774.32	265	6.70	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

tests showed that control parents reported significantly worse parental communication than CIM or CFD groups, which did not differ. Cicchetti tests showed that mothers reported significantly better parental communication than did fathers across CIM and control but not CFD. The Group  $\times$  Measurement Time interaction was significant ( $F(2, 282) = 3.26, p < .05$ ). Cicchetti tests showed that parental communication improved significantly from Time 1 to Time 3 for CIM but not for CFD or control. Figure 2 shows graphed means of the parental communication ANOVA.

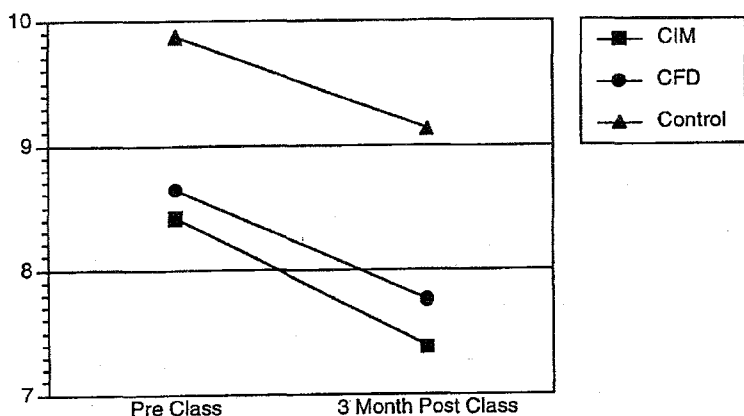


Figure 1. Graphed means of domestic violence ANOVA.

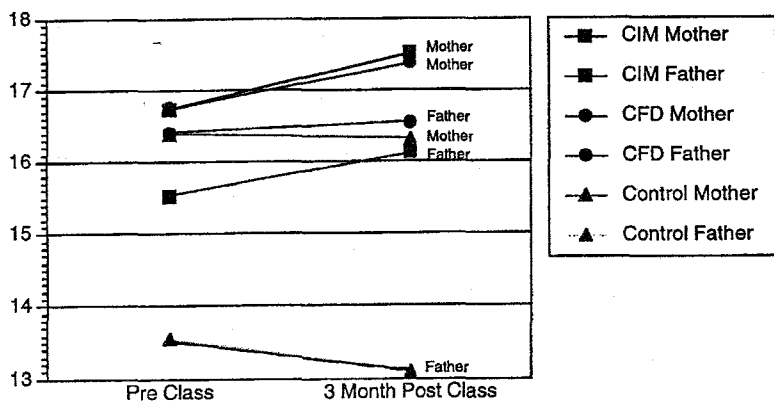


Figure 2. Graphed means of parental communication ANOVA.

No effects on parental conflict due to divorce education were observed. The main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 281) = 7.47, p < .01$ ), indicating that CIM, CFD, and control parents differed in parental conflict scores regardless of time. The main effect of measurement time was significant ( $F(1, 281) = 4.84, p < .01$ ), showing that parental conflict decreased from Time 1 to Time 3 across all groups. All groups reported reduced parental conflict over time, probably due to normal postdivorce anger reduction.

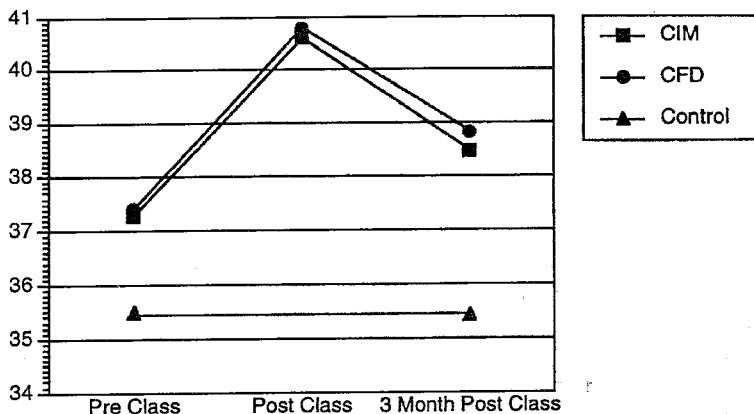


Figure 3. Graphed means of child exposure to conflict ANOVA.

NOTE: Higher scores indicate less exposure to conflict.

Because of the specific focus of CIM on keeping children out of parental conflict, it was expected that children would be kept out of parental conflict most in the CIM group, less in the CFD group, and scores would change least in the control group. This prediction was partially supported. The main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 265) = 10.64, p < .01$ ), and the main effect of measurement time was significant ( $F(1, 265) = 13.05, p < .01$ ). The Group  $\times$  Measurement Time interaction was significant ( $F(2, 265) = 4.03, p < .05$ ) and most interpretable. Cicchetti tests indicated that parents' expectations to keep children out of conflict increased significantly from Time 1 to Time 2 and decreased significantly from Time 2 to Time 3 in CIM and CFD. Overall, CIM and CFD parents kept children out of conflict significantly more than control parents from Time 1 to Time 3. This suggests the effectiveness of divorce education at reducing child exposure to conflict. Figure 3 contains graphed means of the child exposure to conflict ANOVA.

For the item assessing parent satisfaction with changes in parental conflict, the main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 295) = 4.79, p < .01$ ). An HSD test showed that parents were significantly less satisfied with changes in conflict in the control group ( $M = 3.18$ ) than in the CFD group ( $M = 2.62$ ). Parent satisfaction with changes in conflict in CIM ( $M = 2.93$ ) fell between control and CFD but was not significantly different from either one. For the item assessing parent satisfaction with changes in child exposure to conflict, the main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 299) = 6.16, p < .01$ ). An HSD test demonstrated that parents were significantly less satisfied with changes

in child exposure to conflict in the control group ( $M = 3.02$ ) relative to both the CIM ( $M = 2.63$ ) and CFD ( $M = 2.44$ ) groups, which did not differ significantly.

No effects on child behavior due to divorce education were observed. For the Eyberg intensity score and Eyberg problem score, results were similar. Only the main effect of group was significant for the Eyberg intensity score ( $F(2, 202) = 6.88, p < .01$ ) and for the Eyberg problem score ( $F(2, 198) = 5.74, p < .01$ ). On both scales, the control group showed greater child behavior problems than either CIM or CFD, with no changes over time for all groups.

Both intervention groups scored higher on divorce knowledge, but all three groups increased over time. For the eight-item knowledge test, the factor parent was not significant, indicating no gender differences. The main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 251) = 14.58, p < .01$ ), and the main effect of measurement time was significant ( $F(1, 251) = 4.17, p < .05$ ). Control parents knew significantly less than either CIM or CFD parents, and all groups significantly increased knowledge over time. Parenting skills in conflictful situations were affected by divorce education. For the "say" item, the factor parent was not significant. Only the main effect of group was significant ( $F(2, 285) = 3.46, p < .05$ ), indicating that CIM and CFD parents would say significantly more appropriate responses than control parents, with no changes over time. For the "do" item, the main effect of parent was significant ( $F(1, 285) = 7.99, p < .01$ ), indicating that mothers would do significantly more appropriate parenting behaviors than fathers, with no changes over time. Also, the main effect of group was significant ( $F(1, 285) = 6.09, p < .05$ ), indicating that CIM and CFD parents would do more appropriate behaviors than control parents.

Parent satisfaction differed across programs. The main effect of group was significant ( $F(1, 209) = 7.63, p < .01$ ), indicating that CFD parents were more satisfied than were CIM parents across time. Also, the main effect of measurement time was significant ( $F(1, 209) = 61.08, p < .01$ ), showing that satisfaction decreased from Time 2 to Time 3 across both groups.

## ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

Correlational analyses suggest some relationships between parent knowledge and skills and family outcomes. Across all groups, greater levels of knowledge and skills were associated with more positive outcomes for parents and children. Parents with greater divorce knowledge experienced better parental communication and less domestic violence, and better kept



children out of conflict. Five of six correlations between knowledge scores and parental communication scores were significant (ranging from .10 to .14,  $p < .05$ ). Four of six correlations between knowledge and domestic violence were significant (ranging from  $-.12$  to  $-.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ). All nine correlations between knowledge and keeping children out of conflict were significant (ranging from .13 to .26,  $p < .01$ , with most above .20). Similarly, parents with better skills in what to say kept children out of conflict more than parents with worse skills. Five of six correlations were significant (ranging from .10 to .23,  $p < .05$ ). And parents with better skills in what to do kept children out of conflict more than less skilled parents. Seven of nine correlations were significant (ranging from .13 to .32,  $p < .01$ ). Parents who experienced better parental communication suffered less domestic violence (correlations ranging from  $-.23$  to  $-.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Analysis of change scores on variables from Time 1 to Time 3 reveals that improved parent communication skills were associated not only with decreased domestic violence ( $-.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ) but also with decreased parental conflict ( $-.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and increased keeping children out of conflict (.15 to .20,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, increased parent knowledge from Time 1 to Time 3 was associated with decreased parental conflict ( $-.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ), increased keeping children out of conflict (.15 to .20,  $p < .05$ ), and decreased child behavior problems on the Eyberg intensity measure ( $-.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Although correlations between knowledge, skills, and outcomes are small, they suggest general trends in the data.

## DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

Despite concerns that divorce education, which promotes parental cooperation and communication, might increase the frequency and severity of domestic violence, this study indicates that divorce education programs do not increase domestic violence. All groups reported decreased violence over time, probably due to normal postdivorce anger reduction. In fact, correlational analyses revealed that parents with better communication skills experienced a greater decline in domestic violence, experienced less conflict with the other parent, and also exposed their children to less conflict. This suggests that teaching communication skills is desirable in divorce education programs. Consistent with prior research, CIM improved the quality of parental

communication and did so more effectively than did CFD. This result is consistent with CIM's emphasis on communication skills.

Mothers and fathers did not differ in reports of domestic violence, contrary to Newmark et al. (1995). This discrepancy is not surprising when the origins of samples are considered. Newmark et al. recruited their sample from parents who were disputing custody or visitation and were court-ordered to mediation or custody evaluation. The Jacksonville and Birmingham samples included all divorcing parents, not just those experiencing high conflict. When aggression or violence is present, mothers are more likely than fathers to be victimized, and mothers may be more likely than fathers to report it.

Both programs increased parents' expectations that they would keep children out of conflict, and intervention group parents followed through by keeping their children out of conflict more than did control parents. Parents were more satisfied with changes in child exposure to conflict in both CIM and CFD than in control. However, neither program affected actual levels of parental conflict. This suggests that divorced parents may continue to argue among themselves, but they are "arguing responsibly" by not involving their children.

Parents with greater divorce knowledge experienced better communication, decreased conflict, and decreased violence. Parents better skilled in what to say and do exposed children to less conflict. And parents with better communication skills experienced less conflict and exposed children to less conflict. These results underscore the importance of developing parents' knowledge about the impact of divorce on children and enhancing their communication and parenting skills.

Neither program affected parent ratings of child behavior problems. One explanation for this finding may be that one 3-hour divorce education class is insufficient to reverse parent perceptions of ingrained problematic child behavior patterns. Divorce education may be the right treatment, but in this case, an inadequate dosage may have been rendered. Second, as Kurkowski (1996) has observed, it may be that parents are learning the proper actions to take but are not learning the more difficult task of responding to their children's emotions. This interpretation would be consistent with the fact that in all three studies using written problem situations as measures of parental mastery of new skills for resolving conflict, CIM has produced changes in what parents would do in the problem situation but not in what they would say to their children. Third, more appropriate clinical criteria might be child-internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem rather than child-externalizing problems such as disobedience, fighting, or stealing. Finally, it may be that a 3-month follow-up period is not sufficiently long enough to permit noticeable changes in child behavior problems. An

earlier study using a 6-month follow-up period detected significant reductions in child-externalizing problems—specifically, fewer school absences and doctor visits (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b).

Despite the fact that there was no differential reduction in conflict between the two programs, CFD parents were more satisfied than were CIM parents with changes in conflict. Although satisfaction with the both programs decreased uniformly over time, CFD parents were slightly more satisfied than CIM parents. The most obvious explanation is that the content of CFD was more appealing. Alternatively, parents may have found CIM to be more demanding of their attention and effort. It seems easier to listen to information, agree that it makes sense, and intend to change one's behaviors than to practice new skills. It is more disconcerting to see the "wrong" way to handle a situation on video, especially if one has been acting this way. Despite decreased satisfaction with perceived changes in conflict, the active learning and skill practice approach was more effective in producing improved parental communication relative to the more passive learning approach. Minor reductions in parent satisfaction may be a small price to pay for sustained improvements in parent communication skills.

## LIMITATIONS

Control parents had worse scores on most variables, regardless of time. Because their participation was optional, control parents may have been self-selected to some degree because typically they experienced more conflict, violence, and child behavior problems and needed an expressive outlet. Despite worse absolute levels, control parents remained largely unchanged over time, allowing for causal inference on the effectiveness of divorce education at improving parental communication and reducing child exposure to conflict.

A note of caution is necessary concerning the comparison of the two approaches. Although both programs lasted 3 hours, an hour of material was the same for both interventions (this was imposed by the clinic). This may account for the lack of differences between programs, particularly those outcome measures with high informational content (e.g., divorce-related knowledge). Second, CFD facilitators were more experienced with their program than were CIM facilitators (6 months vs. 2 months of practice). This could have resulted in their being perceived as more confident, knowledgeable, or humorous, or it could have resulted in greater fidelity to CFD content.

A final explanation for the moderate effects found in this study may be the size of classes conducted at Hope Haven. Each class of CIM and CFD was

attended by approximately 30 parents. Relatively large classes such as these may detract from parent interaction and learning. When Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996b) detected significant changes in child-externalizing problems, class size ranged from 3 to 22, with a mean of 9. Class sizes ranging from 5 to 15 might be more effective at reducing parental conflict, domestic violence, and child behavior problems. At Hope Haven, about three fourths of CIM parents interacted with facilitators or classmates during class. However, interactions and skill practice usually were limited to one or two interactions per parent, due to the large size of each class. Anecdotal evidence of considerable success has been shared with us by facilitators of the CIM program in Des Moines, Iowa, in which large classes are broken into small discussion groups for skills practice. Not only are skills learned, but parents enjoy the personal contact with one another.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the skill-based approach was more effective than the information-based approach at improving parental communication. Both divorce education programs reduced child exposure to parental conflict. Neither program had effects on domestic violence, actual parental conflict over child issues, or child behavior problems. Mothers learned more divorce-related parenting skills than did fathers. "Information" parents reported being more satisfied with certain aspects of the program than were "skills" parents. Correlational analyses suggest that parents with greater divorce knowledge and communication skills experienced more reciprocal discussions, less conflict, less domestic violence, and exposed children to less conflict. Skill development for divorcing parents, specifically in communication skills and parenting skills, remains a rich area for applied family research and should remain a priority when community and family court funding decisions are made.

Overall, there were few differences in the outcome of the two programs conducted at Hope Haven. This suggests that both were effective at helping divorcing parents learn about child needs and imparting new skills. We do not believe that this study was an ultimate test of skill- versus information-based programs. Given the constraints of applied field research, it is difficult to conduct comparisons that are not somewhat muddled. Second, most significance tests and correlations reported in this study showed modest effects. One might conclude from this that divorce education programs do not measure up to their promise. Alternatively, it may be a signal that changing human behavior is difficult, especially when parents are struggling

with one of the most emotionally, socially, and financially traumatic events of their lives. Rather than be dissuaded, we should renew our efforts to find time- and cost-effective means for imparting new knowledge and skills at a time when they are needed greatly. Results also suggest that divorce educators might move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach and develop programs that are finely tuned to the needs of specific subpopulations of parents with differing problems and abilities. Finally, this study suggests some advantages in training parents to use specific communication and interaction skills that minimize children's exposure to conflict. Regardless of class size, programs must include opportunities to learn and practice these critical skills.

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