

Current Trends in Parent Education: What Works?

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The Center for Divorce Education is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to helping parents minimize the harmful effects divorce has on children.



For more than twenty-five years, The Center for Divorce Education has been dedicated to helping parents and children deal with the difficult process of divorce and separation. Based on our extensive research, we have developed highly effective methods for reducing the stress of divorce and separation for all parties.

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

The vast majority of courts across the United States have policies mandating education for parents dissolving their marriage/union. An increasing number of these courts have parent education courses for those never married parents who wish to separate yet remain involved and co-parent their child(ren).

This should be great news for families in transition. However, the most common approach to cover the critical material is inadequate for actually changing the behavior of adults in the midst of relationship breakdown and conflict. Best practices in adult learning shows that the information/lecture approach is not effective in changing parental behavior. Only the skills-based approach has any evidence that parent behavior changes.

Blaisure, K.R. and Geasler, M.J (2006) Educational interventions for separating and divorcing parents and their children. In M. . Fine and J.H. Harvey (Eds.) *Handbook of Divorce and Relationship Dissolution*. (pp. 575-604) Mahwah, NJ, L. Erlbaum and Associates.

The Center for Divorce Education's (CDE) Children in Between (CIB) program has crafted a skills-based approach to co-parent education. The controlled research conducted on the CIB program demonstrates the benefits of this skills-based class, with most notable parental behavior changes associated with:

- a) improved parental cooperation
- b) improved access to children by the non-residential parent
- c) reduced parent conflict (strongest among those parents who used more of the skills taught within the program)
- d) a reduction in litigation, and
- e) overall improved child adjustment

Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1995; Arbuthnot, Kramer, & Gordon, 1997; Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Arbuthnot, Poole, & Gordon, 1996; Gillard & Seymour, 2005; Brandon, 2004.

CDE's Children in Between holds the distinction of not only being skills-based but is also included in the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, supported by SAMHSA - a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services. To date, the CIB in-person curriculum has been widely used by parent education providers in all 50 states and in the US territories.



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

Study #1: Since 2007, CDE has engaged with courts and judges across the country in a dialogue around parent education and the in-class and online formats. Judges from different parts of the United States expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of an online program vs. traditional, in-person, face-to-face class. *Can a class delivered in an online format really be as effective as one led by a trained facilitator?*

Since that time, several experimental and quasi-experimental studies of CIB online vs. the in-person formats have been undertaken.

During 2011 and 2012 an urban court in the US Pacific Northwest participated in a study comparing their highly regarded information/lecture based class against CIB in-person and CIB online. The study examined:

- (1) the model of parent education and whether or not there was a difference between an information-based class and a skills-based class;
- (2) whether the delivery method (online or face-to-face) made a difference; and
- (3) parents intention for behavior change after taking the course.

This particular urban county offers a face-to-face, information-based course, developed by the court and used for over a decade. Class leaders were highly skilled, experienced and enthusiastic in their delivery. Presenters were also trained to deliver the face-to-face CIB program to mitigate discrepancies in outcomes due to presenter differences. Each parent completed a pre-test questionnaire along with a six-month follow-up.

Examining the results from this Pacific Northwest study item by item, and comparing the responses, we see an effect size that ranges from the small (0.2), medium (0.5) to large (0.8+). **It is interesting to note that most of the effect size differences favored the online group in areas such as:**

- children being easier to handle after a visit,
- children seeing parents argue less at drop-off,
- children not hearing a parent badmouth the co-parent, and
- child support payments being less of a problem.



Study #2: Another study funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse in 2009 examined the impact of online versus in-person classes. The study was conducted through courts in Michigan and Oregon. Parents were randomly assigned to the CIB in-person class (n=84) or the CIB online course (n=66). Effect sizes were moderate to large, showing large treatment effects for both online and in-class (group) conditions. Parent satisfaction was equally high and reports of decreased parental conflict were the same for both conditions. The majority of parents avoided putting their kids in the middle of their conflict at follow-up for both conditions, and also encouraged the co-parent to see the children. The only group difference indicated parents in the online class encouraged the children to see the co-parent more than the in-class condition. For Spanish speaking parents, we noted more improvement in all areas for parents who completed the online class vs. the in-class option.

Study #3: Finally in a 2013 analysis of over 1,500 exit surveys completed by parents from a large urban area in the US, researchers found 86% of parents who participated in CIB online mentioned specific skills they would use to improve communication and maintain emotional control. Another 78% mentioned learning new information about the effects of conflict on their child(ren).

In summary, evidence suggests that CDE's Children in Between Online intervention is at least as effective as the in-person Children in Between classes. The skills based in-person class and online programs are both very effective. However, it should be noted that with the online group, children were exposed to noticeably less conflict and stress. Compliance with child support was less of an issue compared to the in-person class participants.