

## **Study on Instructional Design of Popular Online Co-Parenting Courses**

Gordon, D. A. and Eubanks, M. R. (2024) Best Practices in Online Learning: How to Design Programs for Using New Skills. Presented at AFCC 2024 annual conference, Boston, MA.

### **Abstract**

Since the pandemic, online instruction has proliferated. Quickly getting instructional material out with online programs, including Zoom classes, often meant principles of instructional design were not considered. In the field of co-parenting education, online programs appeared to be developed without knowledge of effective instructional design. The consequences have been that parents were not able to retain the information soon after the classes ended. Since teaching skills have been identified as more important and effective than providing information, the methods used to teach skills are varied and most do not follow best instructional design practice.

### **Introduction**

With the increase in online options for courts to choose from when selecting co-parent education courses, a real problem has emerged: How do courts, who most likely have no experience in evaluating instructional design, choose a course that will best serve parents and children in their jurisdiction? In many cases, when multiple courses have been accepted by a court system, parents often choose the cheapest option, or the option that claims “no quizzes” or “no testing.” For those choosing the “no testing” option, there is no accountability built into the learning environment, so parents can just “hit play and walk away.”

### **Importance of classes**

Divorce is life’s second most stressful event. Families going through this trauma need guidance to navigate the new and challenging changes in the family structure. Unfortunately, not all states and counties mandate co-parenting classes and parents are on their own in dealing with this critical period in their lives.

In the jurisdictions that do mandate co-parenting classes, they vary widely in content, design, effectiveness, and availability. Courts usually approve programs based on a checklist of content items,

which most major programs meet. Unfortunately, these checklists do not include any evaluation of retention and effectiveness of the programs. Decisions are made because court officials do not know how to evaluate programs on such factors as instructional design and evidence of effectiveness. Both take time and resources to consider. For in person programs, surveys of judges at judicial conferences have shown that fewer than 10% of judges have actually attended the class they are ordering, and those who have were unimpressed.

With all the information that co-parenting programs aim to give parents, we think that a realistic look at what parents can retain would dictate giving less information and repeating the most important concepts and skills. Few programs do this. Why mandate parents take a class where they won't remember most of the material? What makes programs or courses memorable is strong instructional design. Robert Gagne introduced his Nine Events of Instruction in 1965 as the essential events that lead to learning. This time-tested approach is backed by research that still holds today, and many practitioners use Gagne's principles when designing instructional sessions. Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction are:

1. Gain attention of the students.
2. Inform students of the learning objectives.
3. Stimulate recall of prior learning.
4. Present the content.
5. Provide learning guidance.
6. Elicit performance (practice).
7. Provide feedback.
8. Assess performance.
9. Enhance retention and transfer

## **Method**

We did not apply these criteria to in person courses, or programs delivered virtually (Zoom, Teams, etc.), since they vary widely across jurisdictions. Many presenters of in person and virtual classes try for the maximum enrollment to increase their income. This likely results in little interaction between the presenter and attendees or among the attendees. In virtual programs, attendees are likely watching a lecture based curriculum for four hours. In this delivery format, there is no way for the

presenter to know if parents are engaged or paying attention. Quizzes on the material are not given, therefore the presenter cannot know the impact of the class. In this scenario, there is no motivation to change their instructional approach since they have no feedback about retention.

We rated the most commonly used online co-parenting programs using Gagne’s Nine Principles as the criteria. Four online programs were chosen and four experienced co-parenting educators (two are retired domestic relations judges) evaluated each program independently. Each of the nine criteria was rated on a 5 point scale. Inter rater agreement was high, over 85%.

### Results

The evaluations using Gagne’s principles scored very low for three of the four programs, and high for one program. See Table 1. The least expensive course was rated the lowest, as it was the least interactive and consisted of only informational slides, with no video content or any interactive elements. Two other courses received low to moderate ratings.

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Course A</b>	<b>Course B</b>	<b>Course C</b>	<b>High Conflict Solutions</b>
Gain Attention	1.6	3.5	2	4.67
Set Learning Objectives	1.6	4	2.67	5
Recall Prior Knowledge	1.8	4	3	5
Present Content	1.4	2.5	2.33	5
Provide Guidance	2	2.75	2.33	5
Elicit Performance	1.2	3	2.67	5
Provide Feedback	1.2	2.5	1.67	5
Evaluate Performance	1	2.75	2.34	5
Enhance Retention & Transfer	1.8	2	2	5
<b>Cumulative Score</b>	<b>1.51</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2.33</b>	<b>4.96</b>

Two to three weeks after the completion of their evaluations, raters were asked three questions:

1. What information did you learn that will be helpful in stressful situations with your ex and/or your child?
2. What skills did you learn that will be helpful in stressful situations with your ex and/or your child?
3. What new information did you get that you can use so that it improves your situation?

In three of the four programs, raters could not recall any information or skills. In the other program, recall of information and skills was detailed and strong.

### **Online or In Person, Information-Based or Skills-Based**

In an article published by The Association of Family and Conciliatory Courts (AFCC), Dr. Don Gordon and Dr. Lisa Horwich discuss the effectiveness of different approaches to parent education for divorcing or separating families. The three main approaches are information/lecture-based, affect-based, and skills-based. Research indicates that the skills-based approach is the most effective in changing parental behavior and improving child outcomes.

The "Children In Between" (CIB) program, developed by the Center for Divorce Education, exemplifies a successful skills-based approach. The program was initially offered in-person and later adapted into an online format. Both formats have shown effectiveness in reducing parental conflict, improving cooperation, and enhancing child adjustment.

Meta-analyses and studies, including one by the U.S. Department of Education, suggest that online learning can be as effective, if not more so, than in-person instruction, particularly when it combines both information and skills-based approaches. Both online and in-person skills-based programs like CIB are effective, with growing trends toward online options in the court system.

### **Instructional Design**

The Children in Between and High Conflict Solutions programs were thoughtfully designed using Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction and principles from John Medina's "Brain Rules." The programs integrate Gagne's model by beginning with gaining attention through award winning video scenarios,

providing guidance through clear, instructions, and ensuring retention with practice and feedback. The videos were relatable as parents readily identified with the actors in the scenes, and the videos had high production value (and earned Telly and W3 awards). Medina's Brain Rules, such as the emphasis on emotional engagement and repetition, are applied to enhance learning and retention, making the programs effective in changing parental behavior and improving child outcomes in the context of divorce and separation.

### **Recommendations**

The authors recommend courts and divorce professionals examine co-parenting courses they plan to offer parents according to Gagne's principles of instructional design. Doing so will increase the chance that parents will retain some knowledge and skills that they can apply to their family breakup. The investment of this time is likely to produce a return on investment when fewer parents return to court because they have retained and used skills for solving problems that arise when co-parenting. More important, the trauma of family break-up will be reduced. <sup>1</sup>

---

1 The staff at the Center for Divorce Education can assist you by rating online programs you are considering offering to parents.

## References

Arbuthnot, J., & Gordon, D. A. (1995). Divorce education for parents and children: Programs for mediators, courts, and schools. *Family Court Review*, 34(1), 60-81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.174-1617.1996.tb00368.x>

Gagne, R. M. (1985). *The conditions of learning and theory of instruction* (4th ed.). Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Gordon, D., & Horwitch, L. R. (2013, June). Online or in person, information-based or skills-based, emerging trends in parent education for divorcing/separating families: What works? *AFCC e-Newsletter*, 8(6). Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. [https://www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/eNews/2013\\_June.pdf](https://www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/eNews/2013_June.pdf)

Medina, J. (2014). *Brain rules: 12 principles for surviving and thriving at work, home, and school*. Pear Press.