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Can Four Hours Make a Difference? Evaluation of a Parent Education Program for Divorcing Parents

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ABSTRACT. A three- to nine-month follow-up evaluation was conducted with a random sample of participants in a four-hour mandated parent education program for divorcing parents in a Southern state. The 345 respondents reported a reduction in nine of ten behaviors associated with putting children in the middle of their parents' conflicts but reported increased levels of conflict between parents from pre-class levels. Post-class evaluations by 9,876 participants revealed high levels of satisfaction with the program and a reduction in levels of resentment at being required to attend the class. The author makes recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of classes based on this and other research. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Divorce education, program evaluation, parent education

Based on the number of mandated parent education programs for divorcing parents conducted across the United States and in other

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countries, it appears that many judges and state legislators believe that such programs can be beneficial to divorcing parents and their children. As of 1998, a total of 48 percent of counties and independent cities in the U.S. had some form of parent education program for divorcing parents (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999), and that number has grown. However, research on the effectiveness of these classes in actually changing parenting practices is very limited in quantity and quality (Whitworth, Capshaw, & Abell, 2002). This leads one to question whether one four-hour class can make a difference in the behaviors of divorcing parents who put their children in the middle of their conflicts.

Researchers have identified parental divorce as a risk factor for a variety of short-term and long-term problems in children. Children of divorce have been found to have double or greater risk of lifelong emotional or behavioral problems in comparison to children whose parents remain married (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). These problems include greater difficulty forming close personal relationships and higher rates of teen marriage, cohabitation, and divorce as adults (Amato, 2003; Hetherington, 2003; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakesley, 2000; Wolfinger, 2003). Lower levels of academic performance (Kelly & Emery, 2003), psychological well-being, and overall well-being (Acock & Demo, 1994; Amato, 2003) and lower quality of parent-child relationships (Booth & Amato, 2001) are more prevalent among children of divorce.

Researchers have sought to learn why some children from divorcing families are able to adjust to the divorce, whereas others have lifelong problems. High levels of conflict, both prior to (Booth & Amato, 2001; Sun, 2001) and after the divorce (Ahrons, & Tanner, 2003; Leon, 2003) have been implicated in poor child adjustment. However, Booth and Amato (2001) found that children whose parents had low levels of conflict prior to divorce had a greater variety of problems, including lower overall mental well-being, less support from friends, and difficulties with close personal relationships, than did children from similar families that remained together. Rohner and Veneziano (2001) found that an ongoing relationship with both parents is predictive of children's overall well-being, and, overall, children in joint custody situations fare better after divorce than children who are in sole-custody settings (Bauserman, 2002).

The high cost of divorce to both individuals and the public may be fueling the decision to mandate programs for divorcing parents. Schramm (2003) estimated the mean cost of each divorce to state and federal governments at \$30,000 in direct and indirect costs. Though individual costs vary immensely, Schramm (June 25, 2003) calculated the

mean cost of divorce per couple to be around \$18,000, including court and legal costs, lost work productivity, and relocation expenses.

Based on Census 2000 population data and data from the National Vital Statistics System (2001) on divorce numbers by state, in 2000, Tennessee's divorce rate of 5.9 per 1000 population was 44% higher than the national rate of 4.1. These statistics may have prompted the state legislature to pass a law, implemented in 2001, that requires divorcing parents to attend a minimum of four hours of parent education specifically dealing with parenting through divorce (Child Custody and Visitation: Parenting Plans, 2004). The purpose of this legislation is to help parents develop parenting plans that are in the best interests of their children and to encourage parents to seek alternatives to courts for resolution of future disputes (Child Custody and Visitation: Parenting Plans). The program contains three components: Attending the parent education course, completion of a detailed parenting plan, and participation in mediation in most situations when parents are unable to develop parenting plans on their own (Child Custody and Visitation: Parenting Plans).

A curriculum from the University of Connecticut, *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting* (Mulroy, Malley, Sabatelli, & Waldron, 1995), and a video, *Children in the Middle*, (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1993) were adapted to develop a four-hour educational program that meets the standards set forth in the legislation and recommendations by judges. Providers of the program are Family and Consumer Sciences educators with The University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the program, *Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting*, is to educate parents about the impact of divorce, separation, and conflict on their children and to offer concrete actions that parents can take to help their children through divorce (The University of Tennessee, 2001). An evaluation strategy was designed to assess program impact, gather input from participants for program improvement, and provide feedback to appropriate stakeholders.

The video program *Children in the Middle* has been evaluated quite extensively by its developers. They have found that divorcing parents who completed the program, in contrast to a comparison group of parents who did not do so, were more cooperative with their ex-spouses on difficult child-related issues, were more willing to allow their children to spend time with the other parent (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996a), and had lower relitigation rates (Arbuthnot, Kramer, & Gordon, 1997). When compared to children from a randomly assigned control group, children whose parents received information on the detrimental effects of

putting children in the middle of their parents' conflicts reported fewer episodes of being caught in the middle (Kurkowski, Gordon, & Arbuthnot, 1993). Also, Arbuthnot and Gordon (1995) found that parents who attended a parent education program within the first three weeks of their original court filing date had a relitigation rate less than one-fourth the rate of parents who attended class more than three weeks after filing. Relitigation rates were no different for parents whose class participation was delayed in comparison to a control group of parents who did not attend a class (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1995). Thus, timing of class participation may be instrumental in program effectiveness.

Researchers investigating other parent education programs have reported mixed results in evaluations of program effectiveness. They found little evidence of long-term effectiveness of parent education classes in reducing parental conflict post-divorce (Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, & Trotter, 1992; Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis, & Hoza, 1998; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999), reducing relitigation rates long-term (Thoennes & Pearson), increasing father involvement with children post-divorce (Douglas, 2004), improving children's behavior (Kramer et al.), or eliminating parenting behaviors that put children in the middle of parental conflicts (Hans & Fine, 2001). However, researchers found support for the effectiveness of parent education classes in enhancing parental communication post-divorce and reducing children's exposure to their parents' conflicts (Kramer et al., 1998), reducing parental conflict (Criddle, Allgood, & Piercy, 2003; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999; Toews & McKenry, 2001), enhancing consistency of both parents' contact with their children and child support payments (Thoennes & Pearson), and reduction in relitigation (Criddle, Allgood, & Piercy) and use of court resources (Ellis & Anderson, 2003). Differing results may be related to length of follow-up, whether participation in parent education was mandated or voluntary, and the length of the parenting classes.

The purpose of this study was to assess participant satisfaction with *Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting*; to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes, and parenting behaviors; and to identify ways to improve the program to meet participants' needs. The class content includes sources of stress for children and adults going through divorce and coping strategies, impact of divorce on children by ages and stages of development, strategies for effective communication, restructuring of families after divorce, alternative dispute resolution, and domestic violence. Parents also view and discuss video-based vignettes of ways parents put their children in the middle of their conflicts and ways to

avoid those behaviors. Participants receive a copy of the booklet *Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting* (The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, 2001) and handouts to supplement the booklet.

METHODOLOGY

Extension Family and Consumer Sciences agents in approximately two thirds of the counties across the state offered *Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting* classes beginning in January 2001. Evaluation instruments and methods were approved through the university's internal review board (IRB).

Prior to class, participants were asked to complete a participant information form on which they reported their use of ten specific behaviors in the past two weeks. Behaviors were among those that have been shown to be detrimental to children in divorce situations: using children as messengers between parents, asking children about the other parent (using as spies), having the children to request money from the other parent, talking negatively about the other parent, and engaging in conflict in front of the children (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996b). Participants reported how often in the last two weeks they had engaged in each behavior using a 5-point scale (0 = none, 1 = one time, 2 = two or three times, 3 = four or five times, 4 = almost daily). Also, parents were asked to assess the level of cooperation with their former partner using a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 = no cooperation, to 5 = complete cooperation. Participants were identified by a code number only. Data were sent to the state office to be compiled and analyzed. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the class at the conclusion of the four-hour program. Statements related to the usefulness of class materials, assessments of changes in knowledge and skills, attitudes about the class, appropriateness of content, and plans for implementing what was learned were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 5, *strongly agree*. Also, participants were asked to identify the best thing about the class, what could be done to improve the class, and any other comments they desired. The evaluation forms were altered slightly after the first year of the program. Therefore, only data from March 2002 through July 2004 are included in this report. During this time, class evaluations were collected for 9,876 participants. Frequencies for participants' responses to

the ten statements were tabulated and reported as percentages for each possible response. A paired samples *t*-test was run for the item rating participants' level of resentment at having to attend the class as assessed prior to and after the class.

Follow-up surveys were sent from the state office from three to nine months following completion of the parenting classes. The mean time from class participation to follow-up evaluation was approximately five and one-half months. Participants were asked how often in the last two weeks they had engaged in the same behaviors they reported on prior to class. Also, they were asked to assess their current level of cooperation with the other parent using the same five-point scale they used previously. Additional questions about use of class materials, use of mediation, and what they had found useful from the class were included, as well.

Follow-up evaluations have been conducted four times since the classes were mandated beginning in January of 2001. After the first year, the follow-up evaluations were changed to make the questions more clear and to gather additional information. Because of the change in questions, data from 2001 cannot be combined with data from subsequent years. Therefore, this study includes only data from March 2002 through July 2004.

Participants for the follow-up evaluation were selected from all participants for whom a signed informed consent form had been received, approximately 60 percent of all participants. A systematic sample with a random start was used. All consent forms were placed together, and, beginning with a random number, every fourth form was selected from the stack, resulting in a sample of 1,463 participants over the twenty-eight month period. The 366 surveys returned resulted in a response rate of 25 percent. However, only 345 responses could be paired with initial data collected prior to taking the classes, which is 24 percent of the follow-up sample.

Participants who completed the follow-up survey were compared to those who did not complete surveys to test for differences between the groups. Independent *t*-tests were used to compare the groups on demographics and responses to the initial survey concerning parenting behaviors that put children in the middle.

Participants' responses to the initial survey were compared to their responses to the follow-up survey using paired samples *t*-tests. Because the number of participants who reported engaging in the behaviors was low, additional analyses of the data were conducted using a nonparametric

measure, as recommended by Ott (1993), the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test.

FINDINGS

Participants completing class evaluations reported great satisfaction with the classes. They strongly agreed or agreed with the following statements in the percentages indicated:

- Overall, the class was worthwhile—91 percent;
- the class helped me to understand how children are affected by divorce—94 percent;
- the class increased my understanding of why it is important for parents to work cooperatively with each other—92 percent; the class increased my understanding of the importance of allowing both parents to have a meaningful relationship with the child/children—90 percent;
- the class presented techniques for effective communication with my children and my former spouse—92 percent;
- I plan to make a stronger effort to work with my ex-spouse for the children's sake—91 percent; and
- I would recommend the program to other separating parents—91 percent.

After completing the class, participants were asked to assess their level of resentment at being required to attend the class before the class began and after completing the class. A total of 9,251 participants completed that item. They reported their level of resentment on a five-point scale where 1 = *not at all resentful* and 5 = *very resentful*. The level of resentment at being required to attend the classes decreased from a mean of 2.43, $SD = 1.34$, prior to class to a level of 1.73, $SD = 1.18$, $p = .000$, after class.

There were no differences between follow-up participants and non-participants on gender or age of participants, number or age of children, or reported levels of cooperation between spouses at the time the class was taken. There were no differences in their initial responses to questions about behaviors that might put children in the middle or in their exposure of children to their conflicts, with one exception. On their initial survey, persons who completed the follow-up survey indicated they were more likely to talk to others about the other parent when they were

angry with that parent ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 1.32$) than did those who did not participate in the follow-up survey ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 1.24$) $p = .003$. This minimal difference between the two groups is an indication that the groups were similar at the time of the initial survey.

Data from the follow-up surveys were compared to data collected at the beginning of the classes to assess behavior change. Parents reported a decrease in these behaviors from time 1 to time 2 as determined using both paired t -tests and the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (see Table 1 for t -test results):

- Talking to others about the other parent when angry at that parent,
- sending messages through the children,
- insulting the other parent in front of the children,
- asking the child about the other parent,

TABLE 1. Comparison of Parent Reports of Parenting Behaviors Pre- and Post-Class

Parent Behavior	Time 1 ^a		Time 2 ^b		n	Mean Dif.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Sent messages by child	0.32	0.81	0.11	0.42	340	0.22***
Talked to others about other parent when mad	1.32	1.32	1.01	1.04	340	0.31***
Insulted other parent	0.16	0.52	0.07	0.34	340	0.09**
Asked child about other parent	0.40	0.82	0.17	0.46	341	0.23***
Asked child to take sides	0.06	0.34	0.02	0.17	340	0.04*
Made the child ask other parent for money	0.13	0.47	0.09	0.36	339	0.04
Argued in child's presence	0.46	0.87	0.14	0.50	325	0.32***
Complained to spouse in child's presence	0.31	0.75	0.06	0.29	323	0.25***
Fought in child's presence	0.05	0.37	0.00	0.00	323	0.05*
Yelled in child's presence	0.27	0.74	0.06	0.29	323	0.21***
Level of cooperation with other parent ^c	3.47	1.43	3.01	1.58	305	

Note. Participants reported how often in the last two weeks they had engaged in each behavior using a 5-point scale (0 = none, 1 = one time, 2 = two or three times, 3 = four or five times, 4 = almost daily).

^aTime 1 is prior to taking the parent education class.

^bTime 2 is three to nine months after taking the class.

^cLevel of cooperation ranges from 1 (no cooperation) to 5 (complete cooperation).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

- asking the child to take sides,
- arguing in front of the children,
- complaining to the other parent in front of the children,
- yelling in front of the children, and
- fighting in front of the children.

The only behavior that remained unchanged was asking the child to ask the other parent for money. Participants completing follow-up evaluations reported an overall decrease in the level of cooperation with their former spouses from a mean of 3.47, $SD = 1.43$, prior to taking the class to a mean of 3.01, $SD = 1.57$, $p = .000$, at follow-up.

Two hundred thirty-six follow-up participants responded to the question *What has been most helpful to you from the class?* Of those, 209 listed specific things learned that had been helpful to them. Most of the comments revolved around learning communication skills or the importance of keeping children out of the middle of parental conflict. Three respondents indicated they had reconciled, one stating they made this decision as a result of attending the class. Eighteen persons offered negative responses, mostly indicating they didn't learn anything or that they had an uncooperative spouse. Others made comments about the parenting plan process, or offered suggestions for improvements to the class. Seventy-six percent of respondents reported that since class completion, they had used the printed materials they received in class.

DISCUSSION

According to Riley (1994), parenting programs that are focused on critical periods to prevent problems or at points of transition, such as divorce, are more likely to be successful than nontargeted parent education programs. The positive evaluations of the *Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting* classes indicate that participants were receptive to the information presented and that class content and presentation were appropriate for most attendees. Comments from participants included statements such as, "It was eye-opening," and "By watching the tapes and reading the materials, I was able to see myself in both the DOs and DON'Ts of parenting." These statements show that participants gained new insights and identified with the content.

Participants' significant decrease in level of resentment is an indicator that attitudes of parents were changed over the course of the four-hour class. One participant wrote, "I was headstrong against this class,

feeling it was useless, but after the class (even after the first night) I was glad it is mandatory. It has already been helpful." However, some participants may have been so distraught by the divorce and their own issues that they were unable or unwilling to learn from these sessions. For example, one respondent said, "Get rid of it; It's not your business," in response to a question about what could be done to improve the class.

There is evidence that the changes in parenting behaviors reported by respondents to the follow-up evaluations may have been attributable, at least in part, to participation in the classes. Of participants who responded to the follow-up survey, 57 percent listed specific things they had found useful from the classes. One participant wrote, "The class (especially the videos shown) made me even more aware of how the divorce affects the children and how to handle talking and communication with them. Also helps me communicate better with the other parent; and I believe the class did wonders for my ex!" However, the lack of a control group makes it impossible to be certain that changes were a result of class participation. Other possible explanations for the reported decreases in behaviors include the passage of time or less frequent contact with the other parent, resulting in less conflict between the parents. Because participants reported that overall conflict with their former spouses had increased since taking the class, it is unlikely that the reported decrease in behaviors that put children in the middle was the result of a decrease in conflict between parents. It is more likely that parents are making an effort to shield their children from their conflicts, even though they continue to have disagreements.

Another limitation of the research is that few parents reported engaging in the behaviors that put their children in the middle. The initial forms were completed before the classes began. It is possible that some parents were unaware of their own negative behaviors until they saw them demonstrated through the videos or saw examples in the printed materials. Several participants said that through participation in the class they became aware of their own behaviors that put their children in the middle. Statements such as, "It helped me to see what was going on between myself, daughter and spouse," and "Just picking up knowledge about issues that I thought I knew but didn't," indicate that parents may not have had prior knowledge of what they were doing to put their children in the middle. Thus, they may have under-reported the actual levels of those behaviors on the initial questionnaire. Additionally, social desirability may have influenced parents to under-report the behaviors in question, both before the classes and in the follow-up survey.

Therefore, actual changes in levels of behavior may have differed from what was calculated using the self-report data.

The low response rate (25% actual and 24% usable) is a cause for concern. I cannot be certain that those who were selected for the follow-up survey but did not respond were similar to follow-up respondents. It is possible that those who responded had different levels of success implementing new behaviors in the time following the class than did those who chose not to respond. However, I observed that the respondents to the follow-up survey who had the most negative responses were among the first to return their surveys. This may indicate that more satisfied participants were slower to respond or may have put off responding altogether.

The comments from the follow-up surveys were less optimistic, overall, than were the comments on the class evaluations. Immediately following class, participants may have been buoyed by the class content and the opportunity to be with others going through a similar experience. It is likely, however, that implementing what they learned was more difficult than they anticipated. One follow-up participant indicated this with the comment, "It is still hard to do the right thing, even though you know you should." Other comments focused on obstacles that hampered implementation of what they learned in class. One father said, "Co-parenting works only when both parents are involved in the child's life regularly. Since obtaining custody of my daughter, the fact of co-parenting is out of the question since her mother never sees or calls her." Several respondents were unhappy that their former spouses did not take the classes. One stated that "The class . . . proves ineffective if only one person is required to take it." Others cited issues such as abuse, mental illness, and alcohol and drug addictions as obstacles to co-parenting.

The fact that having children ask the other parent for money was the only parenting behavior that participants did not report as decreasing indicates that financial issues may be among the most intransigent issues parents face following divorce. Further interventions related to divorce and finances may be needed to change those behaviors.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results of class evaluations and follow-up surveys, it appears that a four-hour class can improve knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of parents going through divorce. However, the expressions

of frustration and dissatisfaction that were evident in several of the follow-up evaluations indicate that one four-hour class is probably insufficient to sustain behavior change long-term. Thus, practitioners might consider how learning could be extended or reinforced beyond the four-hour session. Professionals who want to provide ongoing help to those who are struggling with parenting through divorce might employ one or more of the following strategies:

- Offer more than the minimum four-hour course;
- facilitate an ongoing support group;
- create a virtual support group through a monitored chat room or question and answer forum;
- offer booster sessions at regular intervals following the initial class;
- provide a web site with information that is pertinent to parenting through divorce;
- make proper referrals to other agencies or programs that may be able to help with issues not covered in class (e.g., anger management, alcohol and drug issues, and mental illness);
- offer an on-line or home study course that provides additional information;
- provide a program and/or support group for children of divorcing parents;
- develop a program for families going through divorce that could involve other members of the family system;
- provide a parent education program for stepfamilies;
- regularly provide parents with printed or electronic newsletters with topics about parenting through and beyond divorce; and/or
- include parents in other classes such as basic parenting, financial management, nutrition, and other topics that are of general interest.

Additional research will be necessary to determine which, if any, of these strategies parents might access and if these strategies would be effective in changing behaviors or maintaining behavior changes long-term. Researchers have reported difficulty in recruiting and retaining parents in voluntary parent education groups (Spoth & Redmond, 1996; Watterson, 2001; Wolchik et al., 2002). Because divorced parents often function as single parents, they may not have easy access to child care or the means to pay for such care in order to attend a parenting class. Moreover, parents who share custody of their children usually have less time

with their children than they did prior to the divorce, and they may be reluctant to attend programs that require them to be away from their children. Thus, it is likely that meetings that include children, either with their parents or in a concurrent session, or programs that do not involve attending meetings might be more attractive to divorcing parents. Newsletters have been found to be effective teaching tools for some groups of single parents (Nelson, 1986).

Based on the information gleaned from this research, one four-hour parent education class may lead to behavior change, at least short-term. However, it is not likely these changes will last long-term without additional support or interventions. Employing a variety of follow-up strategies to supplement and reinforce what was taught in classes may support use of parenting behaviors that can truly lessen the negative impact of divorce on children.

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