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Longitudinal Program Evaluation of “Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting”

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A program evaluation was conducted of a parent education program for divorcing parents of minor children. Using a retrospective post-then-pre design, 139 participants reported their knowledge before and after the program and their behaviors in the month prior to the program. Two-month follow-up interviews were used to assess behavior change. Results indicated that participants reported both knowledge gain and behavior change. Change in triangulation avoidance behavior (behaviors to keep children out of the middle of conflict) varied as a function of parenting stage. Knowledge gain regarding the impact of divorce and triangulation on children predicted behavior change in triangulation avoidance. Results are discussed, including recommendations for the program evaluated as well as suggestions for other parenting education programs for divorcing parents.

KEYWORDS coparenting, divorce, parent education, program evaluation

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Parental divorce is prevalent in U.S. family life; between 43% and 50% of first marriages end in divorce, and 50% of U.S. children will experience their parents' divorce (Lansford, 2009). As a result, social scientists have sought to understand the relationship between divorce and child well-being for decades. Child outcomes that have been investigated in relation to divorce and child well-being include academic achievement, psychological adjustment, antisocial behavior, physical health, and later life relationships (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Various mechanisms have been investigated as potential pathways through which the experience of parental divorce translates into poorer outcomes in these key domains of development. Additionally, a variety of programs have been developed targeting those identified mechanisms in an effort to ameliorate the negative effects of parental divorce. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of one such parenting education program for divorcing parents—Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting. We begin by reviewing literature linking divorce to the five key domains of well-being just discussed. Next we review the mechanisms linking divorce with poorer child outcomes. Finally, we provide an overview of the program on which this study is based and pose program evaluation research questions.

DIVORCE AND CHILD OUTCOMES

Research has consistently demonstrated a negative association between divorce and children's academic achievement; two separate meta-analyses supported this relationship (Amato & Keith, 1991; Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, & Telesca, 2001). Children of divorced families were found to have poorer grade-point averages (GPAs) and less motivation toward schooling compared to a control group of children with intact families (Mulholland, Watt, Philpott, & Sarlin, 1991). Ham (2003) additionally reported that students from intact families had GPAs that were almost 11% higher than GPAs of students from divorced families.

The psychological adjustment of children experiencing divorce has also been the focus of several research studies. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Jekielek (1998) examined connections among interparental conflict, marital disruption, and children's level of anxiety and depression and withdrawal. Parental conflict and marital disruption were found to predict children's anxiety and depression. Amato and Sobolewski (2001) also reported that divorce and marital conflict predicted lower levels of psychological well-being in adult offspring, including distress, low self-esteem, and general unhappiness. In a more recent study, Potter (2010) found divorce was associated with a decline in children's psychosocial well-being (internalizing and externalizing problems and poor social skills).

Many studies have shown that children whose parents are divorced engage in higher levels of externalizing behaviors during their adjustment period compared to children whose parents remain married (Lansford, 2009). Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis found that children from divorced families had more conduct problems (misbehavior, aggression, or delinquency) than those with married parents. Additionally, Reifman et al. (2001) replicated and extended Amato and Keith's meta-analysis, reporting a slight, but consistent increase in negative conduct outcomes in children from divorced families as compared to intact families. This relationship was supported with more recent data as well, with children of divorced parents having an increased risk of committing a violent crime by age 50 (Theobald, Farrington, & Piquero, 2013) as well as engaging in delinquent behaviors and truancy (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Rosenthal, 2013) than those with intact families.

Troxel and Matthews's (2004) review article additionally suggests a relationship between marital dissolution and health problems in children. Dawson (1991) found that children living with their formerly married mothers had an increased number of unintentional injuries and illnesses as well as an increased chance of developing asthma compared to children living with both parents. One study reported more chronic health problems (e.g., tuberculosis, hypertension, asthma) and acute health problems (e.g., headaches, hot flashes, profuse sweating) in men with divorced parents compared to those with married parents (Maier & Lachman, 2000). A relationship was also reported between parental divorce and childhood weight problems; on average children of divorced parents have 6% higher body mass index (BMI) compared to children in intact families (Yannakoulia et al., 2008).

Having divorced parents can also affect one's future relationship trajectory. Amato (1996) suggested that adult children of divorced parents have an increased risk of divorcing, and the risk increases if both spouses have divorced parents. Teachman (2002) also found an increased risk of divorce for children who lived apart from either parent as well as for children of divorced parents. However, Crowell, Treboux, and Brockmeyer (2009) found that adults from divorced families were not more likely to divorce within 6 years of marriage than adults from intact families. Using a completed-cohort approach with data from the General Social Survey, Wolfinger (2011) suggested that the transmission of divorce is still present but declining.

MECHANISMS LINKING DIVORCE WITH CHILD OUTCOMES

With divorce as prevalent as it is, researchers have attempted to investigate the mechanisms that serve to link divorce with various aspects of child well-being. These mechanisms have the ability to explain the relationship between divorce and child well-being, thereby providing insight into potential intervention targets.

Socioeconomic Status

Because divorce usually results in declines in standards of living for custodial mothers and their children, socioeconomic status (SES) has been found to be a mediating mechanism that increases the risk of poor child well-being. Economic hardship induced by divorce led to psychological and behavioral problems in children (Amato, 1994). Additionally, Fischer (2007) found that children whose fathers had high predivorce levels of resources experienced a larger divorce effect than those whose fathers had more modest incomes, with the children of high-income fathers facing a greater loss of financial well-being and becoming more at risk for negative outcomes following the divorce.

Interparental Conflict

Conflict between divorced parents is an additional mechanism investigated by researchers to explain the relationship between divorce and child well-being. Lee (1997) reported that postdivorce interparental conflict predicted the occurrence of behavioral problems in children ages 4 to 12. In a study examining postdivorce attachment in children ages 12 to 73 months, Altenhofen, Sutherland, and Biringen (2010) found frequent postdivorce interparental conflict was related to decreased emotional availability in mothers. Prolonged low levels of emotional availability to young children could lead to poor attachment and other problems. Roth, Harkins, and Eng (2014) examined parental conflict during divorce, sibling relationships, and later life romantic relationships. The findings indicated a decrease in young women's confidence to form and sustain relationships and trust partners due to experiencing parental divorce and conflict, especially overt interparental conflict.

PostDivorce Triangulation

Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) examined adolescents' feelings of being caught between parents and how these feelings explained their postdivorce adjustment. The authors found that adolescents whose divorced parents had a hostile, high-conflict relationship were more likely to feel caught in the middle than youth whose parents were able to cooperatively coparent. Additionally, feeling caught between parents was strongly associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and delinquent behaviors in the adolescents. In fact, a relationship between parental conflict and poor adjustment was found, but only through adolescents' perception of being caught in the middle (Buchanan et al., 1991). Schrodtt and Afifi (2007) also found that, compared to young adults from intact families, young adult offspring from divorced families reported more marital conflict and feelings of

being caught in the middle of conflict as well as less family satisfaction and weaker relationships with parents.

PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR DIVORCING PARENTS

Given that approximately half of the country's children are likely to experience their parents' divorce, many institutions interested in the well-being of children are concerned about the negative effects divorce can have on child outcomes. Some concerned entities have sought to reduce the incidence of divorce itself (e.g., Louisiana Covenant Marriage Law, Strong Marriages Florida, Marriage Savers, Utah Marriage), and others have tried to reduce the impact of divorce on children by addressing the known mechanisms that link divorce with reduced child well-being.

As part of the latter group, court-affiliated programs for divorcing parents of minor children emerged in the 1970s, and are currently operating in 46 states (Salem, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2013), although they are sometimes required only in certain counties or judicial districts. Often, these programs attempt to inform parents about how interparental conflict affects children and teach parents problem-solving, communication, and conflict management techniques. By helping parents learn how to reduce conflict and keep their children out of the middle of their disagreements, these programs not only target two of the key mechanisms responsible for conveying the negative effects of divorce (thereby helping children), but they also assist postdivorce parents themselves by targeting a major challenge they face—that of parental alienation behaviors from the coparent (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Programs might also teach parents skills to aid them in planning family activities, setting appropriate limits, and developing a behavior plan for their child (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008).

Program Effectiveness and Moderators

There is widespread evidence of parent satisfaction in evaluations of parent education programs for divorcing parents; both court-mandated parents and those participating voluntarily reported that the information provided was helpful (Salem et al., 2013). Additionally, a meta-analysis of 19 evaluation studies of parent education programs concluded that parents who participated “were significantly better off than those who did not on several outcomes including co-parenting conflict, parent–child relationships, child well-being and parent well-being” (Salem et al., 2013, p. 137). Although evaluation findings are generally positive, there is consensus that more rigorous evaluation is needed to determine the effects of parent education for divorcing parents (Salem et al., 2013).

Gender differences, racial differences, and parenting stage differences of participants attending parent education programs have been examined in past research to determine whether those differences affect one's knowledge and behavior change. In a meta-analysis of father involvement in parent training, Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, and Lovejoy (2008) found that mothers and fathers do not benefit equally from parent education programs. Immediately following participation, "fathers made fewer changes in their behaviors and perceptions of childrearing as compared with mothers" (Lundahl et al., 2008, p. 103). Although an increasing number of parent education programs have been adapted for diverse audiences, Ortiz and Del Vecchio's (2013) review identified only one rigorous study examining ethnicity as a moderator of outcomes from a parent education program; thus it remains possible minority participants might not receive the same program benefit as White participants. According to Amato's (1994) meta-analysis, divorce affects children of various ages differently, so a parenting program for divorcing parents might be more or less effective based on the ages of the participants' children.

Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting

Divorcing parents of minor children in Tennessee are court-ordered to attend a 4-hour parent education class and develop a parenting plan. Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting is one such program offered by the University of Tennessee Extension (UT Extension). The program is currently available to parents in 61 counties in Tennessee, and Family & Consumer Science (FCS) agents facilitate the program in their respective counties. The purpose of the program is to "educate parents about the impact of divorce, separation, and conflict on their children and to offer concrete actions that the parents can take to help their children" (University of Tennessee, 2013).

The curriculum used in the program was adapted to meet Tennessee state law requirements from the University of Connecticut curriculum, Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting. It uses educational videos from the evidence-based Children in Between program (formerly called Children in the Middle; University of Tennessee, 2013). For example, participants are shown video clips related to putting children in the middle of conflict, parents' use of putdowns, money issues, quizzing the child about the ex-spouse, and long-distance parenting. As part of the Parenting Apart curriculum, agents speak about topics such as reconciliation, stress, grief, reactions of children based on their age and stage of development, and communication between ex-spouses. Also discussed with the participants are the differences between cooperative and parallel parenting, the possible changes in family structures following a divorce, and strategies to ease the transitions between homes for children. Information on opportunities for reconciliation, domestic violence, the parenting plan, and alternate

dispute resolution was added to the curriculum. Parents are also given a booklet containing detailed information on all the topics covered in the program to serve as a helpful reference. Brandon (2006) evaluated this program and found that participants reported a decrease in 9 of 10 negative behaviors of divorced parents.

In summary, divorce has been linked to adverse child outcomes, and three key variables (SES, interparental conflict, and postdivorce triangulation) help explain this relationship. Parenting education programs for divorcing parents can improve postdivorce parenting, and their effectiveness might be contingent on participant characteristics (gender, race, age and stage of child). Thus, the purpose of this study was to longitudinally evaluate a parenting education program for divorcing parents of minor children. We investigated both knowledge gain and behavior change in participants and explored whether gender, race, or parenting stage moderated knowledge or behavior change. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Do parents report a greater level of knowledge at Time 2 (T2, immediately following 4-hour program) compared to Time 1 (T1, before participation in program) in the following three areas: (a) the impact of divorce on children, (b) the impact of triangulation (putting children in the middle of conflict) on children, and (c) strategies to reduce conflict with one's coparent?
2. Do parents report improved behaviors at Time 3 (T3, 2 months following participation in the program) compared to T1 in the following two areas: (a) managing conflict with their former spouse and (b) keeping children out of the middle of conflict?
3. Do knowledge change and behavior change vary as a function of parent gender, race, or parenting stage?
4. Does T1 to T2 knowledge change predict T1 to T3 behavior change, controlling for parent gender, race, and parenting stage?

METHODS

Sample

The sample included divorcing parents enrolled in classes taught by UT Extension FCS agents who (a) were offering a class within the 2-month window of investigation, and (b) agreed to participate in the evaluation. Of the 48 counties offering the program during the 2 months, a total of 86 classes were conducted with 517 total participants. FCS agents representing 19 counties (with 27 classes and 198 eligible participants) agreed to participate in this study. Of the 198 parents who attended those classes, 139 agreed to participate in this study and provided usable T1 and T2 data. One hundred

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	65	46.8
Female	73	52.5
Missing	1	0.7
Race		
White (non-Hispanic)	129	92.8
Black (non-Hispanic)	7	5.0
Other	1	0.7
Missing	2	1.4
Age group		
Under 20	2	1.4
20–29	50	36.0
30–39	50	36.0
40–49	31	22.3
Over 50	3	2.2
Missing	3	2.2
Separated from spouse		
Yes	125	89.9
No	11	7.9
Missing	3	2.2
Length of separation		
6 months or less	60	43.2
7–12 months	28	20.1
Over a year	37	26.6
Not applicable	10	7.2
Missing	4	2.9

six participants provided T3 data. Descriptive statistics pertaining to sample characteristics are provided in [Table 1](#).

Procedure and Instruments

This evaluation study utilized a paper survey distributed to participants at the end of the 4-hour program and a 2-month follow-up telephone interview. After completing the 4-hour Parenting Apart program, all parents were informed of the nature of the program evaluation and invited to participate. Those who agreed to complete the paper survey and participate in the 2-month follow-up telephone interview signed the informed consent statements. Participants were each given an unmarked manila envelope with a survey inside. FCS agents read the survey instructions aloud, and participants were asked to complete the survey while agents read the items aloud. Participants were then instructed to put each completed survey back into its original envelope and seal it. FCS agents collected the sealed envelopes, placed them in a preaddressed mailing box, and sealed the box. The agents were instructed to mail the box of surveys and envelope of informed consent

statements (separately) to the first author within 2 business days. Each study participant was given a UT Extension tote bag after completing the survey.

For the follow-up telephone interviews, the first author used a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system. The first telephone calls were attempted at 60 days from survey completion, and no more attempts were made after 75 days had elapsed. If a participant was still unable to be reached by the seventh call, another phone message was left, and no further attempts were made. This procedure resulted in follow-up data from 106 participants, representing 76.3% of the initial sample. At the beginning of the phone interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, the nature of the interview, the confidentiality measures, and their right to skip a question or to stop the interview at any time. Phone interview participants were entered into a drawing for two \$50 Walmart gift cards.

Rationale for Post-then-Pre Design

To measure knowledge gain, a retrospective post-then-pre design (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989) was used. In this design, program participants are asked to assess their current knowledge immediately following the program and then to reflect back and assess knowledge in the same areas before participating in the program. Thus, both assessments of knowledge (before and after the program) are gathered at the same time with the parents reflecting back to provide T1 data.

The retrospective post-then-pre design was used in this particular evaluation study for two reasons. First, it was chosen because divorcing parents participating in the program were court mandated to have 4 hours of instruction time. UT Extension personnel believed that a traditional pre-post design would take too much time away from the 4 hours of instruction.

Second, the design was chosen to reduce response shift bias. Response shift bias occurs when participants use different frames of understanding regarding the survey items between the pre- and postevaluation periods (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). Thus in a traditional pre-post design, participants might not accurately assess their preprogram knowledge because they are unaware of what could be known with regard to the topics of interest. In essence, the participants are assessing pre- and postknowledge based on two different frames of reference. The retrospective post-then-pre design controls for response shift bias by allowing participants to assess their pre- and postknowledge in one frame of reference (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000).

Hill and Betz (2005) examined the traditional pre-posttest and the retrospective post-then-pre for bias, and they recommended the retrospective post-then-pre design when needing to assess participants' knowledge and subjective experiences related to the program intervention. Additionally,

Doll, Bartenfeld, and Binder (2003) stated, "participants may serve as their own controls" (p. 54) in the retrospective post-then-pre design.

Measures

MEASURING PARENTAL KNOWLEDGE

Nineteen items were intended to measure knowledge of (a) the impact of divorce on children, (b) the impact of triangulation on children, and (c) strategies to reduce conflict with one's coparent. The items were created by the investigators based on the content of the Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting program. The participants rated their level of knowledge on a scale from 0 (*low*) to 6 (*high*) for each of the 19 statements, first rating their knowledge after the class (T2) and then rating their knowledge before taking the class (T1). A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation of the 19 T1 items was conducted. Visual inspection of the scree plot (Costello & Osborne, 2005) indicated two factors. Following the suggestions of Freestone and McGoldrick (2008), four items were dropped due to cross-loadings over .40. The two established factors made conceptual sense, and the remaining 15 items loaded on the two factors with loadings over .49 and no cross-loadings over .38. Although our original research questions involved three areas of knowledge, and we expected our 19 items to load on three factors, the bulk of the items intended to tap knowledge of the impact of divorce and knowledge of the impact of triangulation loaded together on one factor. Thus, our investigation continued with two rather than three participant knowledge constructs as described next. For each of the 19 knowledge items, participants were asked to respond on a scale from 0 (*low*) to 6 (*high*) to the following prompt: "Please indicate how much you NOW KNOW about each of the following topics in the first column. THEN, use the column on the right to indicate how much you knew about each topic before taking the class."

Divorce and triangulation knowledge. Twelve items loaded on the factor measuring knowledge of the impact of divorce on children and triangulation (putting children in the middle of conflict). Sample items included "Impacts of divorce on children of various ages," "Reasons not to use your child as a messenger," and "Reasons not to put down the other parent in front of your child." The 12 items were averaged to create composite T1 and T2 divorce and triangulation knowledge scales. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the constructed scales were .92 at T1 and .87 at T2.

Conflict reduction knowledge. Three items loaded on the factor tapping participants' knowledge of strategies to reduce conflict with one's former spouse. These items include both interpersonal strategies (e.g., utilizing parallel parenting in times of high conflict) and formal strategies (e.g., participating in mediation). The three items were averaged to create composite

T1 and T2 conflict reduction knowledge scales. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the constructed scales were .82 at T1 and .81 at T2.

MEASURING PARENTAL BEHAVIOR

Eight items were intended to measure participants' self-reported behaviors; three items were intended to measure participants' conflict-reduction behaviors, and five additional items were intended to measure triangulation avoidance behaviors. Participants reported their T1 behaviors at the end of the 4-hour workshop by responding to the prompt, "Please reflect back on your interactions with your child(ren) and your ex-spouse over the course of the MONTH PRIOR to taking this class." They reported their T3 behaviors during the follow-up phone interview approximately 2 months later, responding to the prompt, "Please think about typical interactions with your former spouse and your behavior over the past month." A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation of the preceding T1 8 items found two factors with eigenvalues over one. Visual inspection of the scree plot (see Costello & Osborne, 2005) also confirmed two factors, thus those factors were retained and examined. The items loaded on the two factors as originally anticipated with factor loadings above .60 and no cross-loadings greater than .20.

Conflict-reduction behavior. Three items loaded on the factor measuring participants' self-reported behaviors related to managing conflict with their coparent. Participants responded (at T1 and T3) on a 4-point scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*) to each of the following items: How often did you purposely use cooperation techniques to reduce conflict (e.g., compromising, staying on topic)? How often did you use effective communication techniques to manage conflict (e.g., "I" messages)? How often did you try to work with the other parent for the sake of your child? The three items were averaged to create composite T1 and T3 conflict-reduction behavior scales. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the constructed scales were .72 at T1 and .87 at T3.

Triangulation avoidance behavior. Five items loaded on the factor measuring participants' behaviors related to keeping their children out of the middle of conflict. Participants reported (for T1 and T3) the frequency of their behavior (from 0 = *never* to 3 = *often*). Sample items are: How often did you use your child as a messenger between you and the other parent? and How often did you quiz your child about the other parent (e.g., asked about the other parent's thoughts, feelings, or behavior)? The five items were averaged to create composite T1 and T3 triangulation avoidance behavior scales. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the constructed scales were .78 at T1 and .88 at T3. All five items were reverse coded such that a higher score on this variable represented a higher level of triangulation avoidance (i.e., more effective parenting).

MODERATORS

The parent gender variable was created based on participants' direct responses on the written survey; they were asked to circle either Male (coded 0) or Female (coded 1). Participants were also asked to circle their race or ethnicity from the options Black (non-Hispanic), White (non-Hispanic), Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Other. No participants selected Hispanic, Asian, or Pacific Islander. Participants who selected Black (non-Hispanic) ($n = 7$), or Other ($n = 1$) were coded 0 (non-White) and those who selected White (non-Hispanic) ($n = 129$) were coded 1. The parenting stage variable was coded 0 for participants who indicated they were parenting at least one child above the age of 5 ($n = 84$), and 1 for participants who indicated they were parenting only children age 5 and under ($n = 52$).

Analysis

Knowledge change in the two areas was investigated using paired t tests. First, a paired t test compared T1 and T2 conflict-reduction knowledge scores. Second, a paired t test compared T1 and T2 divorce and triangulation knowledge scores. To investigate whether participants reported changes in their behaviors over the 2-month period following the workshop, paired t tests were conducted comparing T1 and T3 conflict-reduction behavior scores as well as T1 and T3 triangulation avoidance behavior scores.

To address the third research question, four repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to determine whether the pre–post differences in the two knowledge measures and the two behavior measures varied as a function of participants' gender, race, and parenting stage. The pre and post scale scores were entered as within-subjects factors. Parent gender, race, and parenting stage were entered as between-subject factors. Parent race was included as a factor in the interest of thoroughness and to establish a template for future evaluators to follow; however, it was presumed race would be nonsignificant due to the very small number of minorities in the sample.

To address the fourth research question (whether changes in knowledge predicted changes in behavior), we first calculated change scores for the two T1 to T2 knowledge variables and the two T1 to T3 behavior variables. Then, ordinary least square (OLS) regressions were estimated of behavior change on knowledge change, parent gender, race, and parenting stage for each of the two domains (managing conflict with coparent, keeping children out of the middle of conflict). Specifically, we (a) regressed T1 to T3 conflict-reduction behavior change on T1 to T2 conflict-reduction knowledge change, gender, race, and parenting stage; and (b) regressed T1 to T3 triangulation avoidance behavior change on T1 to T2 divorce and triangulation knowledge change, gender, race, and parenting stage.

TABLE 2 Means and Standard Deviations and Results of Paired *t* Tests

	Pre		Post		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Divorce and triangulation knowledge	4.14	1.17	5.58	0.56	-14.11*	125
Conflict-reduction knowledge	3.27	1.49	5.30	1.02	-15.26*	133
Conflict-reduction behavior	2.18	0.64	2.64	0.96	-4.43*	103
Triangulation avoidance behavior	2.29	0.61	2.76	0.31	-8.72*	103

Note. Pre = knowledge and behavior at T1; Post = knowledge at T2 and behavior at T3.

* $p < .001$.

RESULTS

All four paired *t* tests demonstrated pre–post change in the anticipated direction. Thus, participants reported increases in both knowledge domains (divorce and triangulation knowledge and conflict-reduction knowledge, comparing T1 and T2 reports) as well as increases in both behavioral domains (conflict-reduction behavior and triangulation avoidance behavior, comparing T1 and T3 reports). The results of the paired *t* tests are presented in Table 2.

The repeated measures ANOVAs for divorce and triangulation knowledge change, conflict-reduction knowledge change, and conflict-reduction behavior change did not demonstrate statistically significant variation by gender, race, or parenting stage. The repeated measures ANOVA for triangulation avoidance behavior change did not find statistically significant variations by gender or race, but did demonstrate a statistically significant variation for parenting stage, $F(1) = 8.45$, $p < .01$, with parents of younger children reporting less behavior change than parents of older children.

With regard to the results of the OLS regressions, T1 to T2 conflict-reduction knowledge change did not significantly predict T1 to T3 conflict-reduction behavior change, controlling for parent gender, race, and parenting stage. Parent gender, race, and parenting stage were also nonsignificant in this regression. The results of the second OLS regression indicated that T1 to T2 divorce and triangulation knowledge change did significantly predict T1 to T3 triangulation avoidance behavior change, controlling for parent gender, race, and parenting stage ($p < .05$). Parent gender and race were nonsignificant in this regression, but parenting stage significantly predicted behavior change ($p < .01$), again with parents of younger children reporting less change than parents of older children.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether participants in Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting reported changes in their knowledge and

behaviors with regard to reducing conflict with their former spouse and keeping their child out of the middle of conflict. This study moved beyond Brandon's (2006) study in that it measured distinct knowledge constructs and tested whether knowledge gain in two separate areas predicted behavior change in conceptually related areas. Also, this study considered the possibility that the program functioned differently based on participants' parenting stage (parenting only younger children vs. parenting some school-aged children).

Overall, the results suggest that participants' knowledge increased, perhaps as a function of the various program activities (videos, verbal presentation of material by the FCS agent, and program booklet). Participants reported more knowledge on how divorce impacts children as well as more knowledge about how to reduce conflict with their coparent. The knowledge gain might be attributed, in part, to the high relevancy of information presented over the course of the program. Because the majority of participants attended because a divorce was filed, the information taught by the extension agents was most likely very relevant to the participants and pertained to their immediate circumstances.

Participants also reported more frequent behaviors to reduce conflict with their coparent and less frequent behaviors that placed children in the middle of conflict 2 months after the program compared to the month prior to the program. It is possible that after participating in the program, the participants felt motivated to behave differently for the sake of their children. Thus, there is preliminary evidence that Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting is successful in addressing two mechanisms that have been found to explain the effects of divorce on child well-being: interparental conflict and postdivorce triangulation. Research suggests that by reducing interparental conflict, parents can decrease the likelihood of their children developing behavioral problems (Altenhofen et al., 2010; Lee, 1997). By knowing more about the impact of postdivorce triangulation and avoiding triangulation behaviors, parents are ultimately benefiting their children by reducing the likelihood of youth depression, anxiety, and delinquency (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Buchanan et al., 1991; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007).

Parents with only children age 5 and under reported less behavior change with regard to putting children in the middle of conflict than parents with at least one child over the age of 5. This finding is not surprising, given that our measure of triangulation behavior, and indeed the nature of triangulation itself, is more relevant to older children than younger children (e.g., it is unlikely a parent would ask a 2-year-old to request money from the other parent). In fact, the age of 5 was selected as a cutoff for parenting stage because most 5-year-olds are in kindergarten and typically have more advanced communication, reasoning, and memorization skills than younger children (Oesterreich, 2007). It was thought parents might feel more inclined

to triangulate children over the age of 5 due to their more developed abilities to accurately pass messages to the other parent, answer question about the other parent, and request money from the other parent. Thus, we interpret the result that triangulation behavior change varied by parenting stage as further evidence of the validity of the measure and as a positive sign that triangulation was reduced among the portion of the sample most at risk for it.

Parents who reported higher increases in divorce and triangulation knowledge also demonstrated larger decreases in behaviors that put children in the middle of conflict. This was the most rigorous test we performed of whether information was learned and translated into actions that benefit children, so the results are heartening. It is also important to note that the participants watched video segments demonstrating how parents put children in the middle of conflict and how parents can change their behavior to not put children in the middle. It might be that by pairing information about the negative effects of triangulating children with video segments showing the process of behavioral change, participants acquired greater skills and greater motivation to avoid triangulating their own children.

Learning strategies to reduce conflict with one's coparent was not related to reported increases in engaging in those conflict-reducing behaviors. Thus, although it is noteworthy that participants reported increased use of conflict-reduction behaviors, it is unclear what prompted that behavior change. It is possible that the program does not sufficiently emphasize cooperation and communication techniques as a means of managing conflict. It is apparent and plausible the information presented on triangulating one's child in conflict was more amenable to being directly applied to one's behavior than the information presented on managing postdivorce conflict, given that participants are likely more concerned about their child's well-being than about their relationship with their former spouse.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is its reliance on self-report. The participants were asked to report on their frequency of doing some socially undesirable behaviors such as arguing with their former spouse in front of their child or children. Adding to the possibility of this bias occurring among the participants is the fact the behavior items were addressed via the follow-up telephone interviews, which are less private than written surveys. Self-reporting might also be inaccurate because "everyone's self-assessments can fluctuate greatly and may not provide a reliable measure of knowledge, skill, attitudes, or behavior" (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005, p. 2).

Further, 70% of the eligible participants agreed to participate in the study. It is possible the 30% who chose not to participate after completing the 4-hour workshop had less favorable attitudes toward and experiences with the program than those who chose to participate in the study.

Thirty-three participants completed T1 and T2 data but did not participate in the follow-up phone interview. Follow-up analyses suggested that the nonrespondents were disproportionately female, which introduces an additional threat to the generalizability of the findings. It is possible that the results for behavior change might have been different if more single mothers had been included. Many participants were unable to be reached due to changed phone numbers and residences. Further, because calls were not made on the weekends, it was impossible to contact the participants who were only available at that time. It is also clear that younger participants were harder to reach, perhaps due to changes in their residency, changes in their phone numbers, or lack of interest in completing the follow-up portion. A majority of respondents to the telephone interview had at least one child over the age of 5. Younger parents were perhaps more difficult to reach due to having limited free time while caring for their younger children.

Finally, this evaluation was not able to use a control or comparison group. It is therefore impossible to make claims that the Parenting Apart program was the reason parents reported knowledge gains and improved behaviors. The issue of the passage of time or other outside influences could potentially explain why the participants reported they learned more and improved their behaviors following the class. Because Tennessee mandates a 4-hour parent education program for divorcing parents of minor children, it would have been difficult to create a control group of divorcing parents who were not taking a similar program. It was not feasible to create a control group of parents from another state due to time constraints, cost, and distance.

Future Directions

As indicated by results of this evaluation, UT Extension's Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting program does seem to produce knowledge gain and improved behaviors in participants over a short amount of time. In the future, a long-term evaluation needs to be conducted on this program to expand on the findings of Brandon's (2006) study and this study. With additional resources, a more thorough longitudinal evaluation using a wait list control group could be developed and conducted to further determine the effect of the parent education program on the long-term well-being of families. Children's reports of their parents' behavior could also be incorporated into a future evaluation to better ascertain how the divorce, and the educational program, are affecting the child.

The knowledge constructs should be investigated to pursue the question of whether divorce impact knowledge and triangulation impact knowledge are two separate things. It is plausible that there are other measurable and meaningful constructs that better predict the future behavior of participants than the items used in this evaluation. It would also be useful to

find additional items that measure conflict-reduction knowledge so the measure is richer. Reflecting on the items used to measure the behavior of the participants, it is clear that some items might only have applied to parents with older children (i.e., having child request money from the other parent, quizzing child about the other parent, etc.). In the future, evaluators need to include items that measure triangulation avoidance behavior of parents with younger children, such as a parent coercing one's child to say he or she wants to live with one parent over the other.

Because Parenting Apart does not serve a racially diverse audience, but likely serves a socioeconomically diverse audience, and findings in previously reviewed literature indicate that SES does matter in terms of parenting style (Amato, 1994; Fischer, 2007), it would be pertinent to investigate whether SES influenced parents' knowledge change and behavior change. In two different findings of this evaluation study, parenting stage was found to be significant; thus it is suggested that future evaluation studies investigate knowledge and behavior outcome differences in parents based on the age of children they are parenting.

Finally, in an effort to improve the Parenting Apart program and other programs for divorcing parents, it is suggested that the curriculum focus more on cooperation and communication techniques as a means to effectively manage postdivorce conflict. Accordingly, it is also suggested that the curriculum be altered to become as skill-based as it is information-based. As previously discussed, the video segments on postdivorce triangulation might explain why knowledge gain in that area predicted the behavior change in the same area. To further promote long-term behavior change and knowledge retention in both the knowledge and behavior areas, the curriculum could possibly include role-playing activities or additional video segments. It would also be in the best interest of the program to ensure the information provided is relevant for parents with young children. Based on the findings in this evaluation and the current organization of the program, it is possible that the program as a whole is more relevant to parents with older children. Because parents of minor children of all ages attend the program, it is important the program is relevant to all parents, regardless of the ages of their children.

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