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Online or In Person, Information-Based or Skills Based, Emerging Trends in Parent Education for Divorcing/Separating Families: What Works?

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In the vast majority of courts across the United States there exists some form of policy for mandating a parent education course for parents who wish to dissolve their marriage and even for those never married parents who wish to separate yet remain involved and co-parent their child(ren). The most prevalent approach employed for disseminating the numerous topics mandated for such classes is inadequate for actually changing the behavior of these adults who are in the midst of family transition and often in conflict. The information/lecture approach is the most widely used, but does not change parental behavior. Only the skills-based approach has any evidence that parent behavior changes.

The Center for Divorce Education distributes the Children in Between (CIB) program, (formerly Children in the Middle) a skills-based approach. The controlled research conducted on the CIB program demonstrates the benefits of this skills-based class, with most notable 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). To date, the CIB in-person curriculum has been widely used by parent education providers across the United States, in all 50 states.

Support for the skills-based approach with divorced parents can also be found in the work from the New Beginnings program out of Arizona State University and the Parenting Through Change program out of the Oregon Social Learning Center. Both are group approaches with 10-14 sessions in which parents are taught skills, with extensive skill practice. Both programs have produced strong positive effects on parent and child behavior that persist over time (Wolchick, Sandler, Weiss, & Winslow, 2007; Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999). Of note, all three programs, New Beginnings, Parenting Through Change, and Children In Between hold the distinction of not only being skills-based but also being included on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, supported by SAMHSA a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

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

Over the past four years, the Center has engaged courts and judges across the country in a dialogue around parent education and the in-class and online formats. Most judges we spoke with, in different parts of the United States, express skepticism about the effectiveness of an online program vs. a traditional, in-person, face-to-face class.

When we look to the research to find answers to the question of online versus in-person for co-parent education, there are several experimental and quasi-experimental studies of CIB Online have been conducted. In Ireland, a doctoral student conducted a treatment and control group comparison for CIB Online. The small sample (n=16) of online and controls prevented quantitative analyses other than inspecting means. Those means whose trends were supported by parent comments in the qualitative analyses included: parents reported increased confidence in their parenting and improved parenting, such as taking the time to listen to their children, cuddle with them, and having more patience. They used skills taught in the program to improve the co-parent relationship. Parents reported using self-talk, considering the other person's perspective and managing their own emotions. The

qualitative analyses showed improvements in parental self-efficacy and children's adjustment corresponding to the means, which did not change for the control participants.

In 2011 and 2012 an urban court in the Pacific Northwest of the United States participated in a study comparing their highly regarded information class, to CIB in person, to CIB Online.

Each participant completed a pre-test questionnaire along with a six-month follow-up. The total number of participants was 223, with approximately 75 from each treatment group. While the researchers had hoped for a larger sample size, participation return rates for the six-month follow-up were only 30-32%.

Preliminary results reveal that by simply combining all survey questions together and looking across the three groups, there appears to be no statistically significant results. However, if we look at the results item by item and compare the responses across all three treatment groups, we see effect sizes that range from the small (0.2), medium (0.5) to large (0.8+). **Most of the effect size differences favored the online group in areas such as: (a) kids being easier to handle after a visit, (b) kids seeing parents argue less at drop-off, (c) kids not hearing a parent badmouth the co-parent, and (d) child support payments being less of a problem.** One question showed greater improvement for the information-based/group class than the online course—parents complaining less to the kids about money issues.

Another study examining the impact of online versus in-person, funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, was conducted through courts in Michigan and Oregon. Parents were randomly assigned to the CIB group class (n=84) or the CIB online course (n=66). RETURN RATES VARIED FROM 27-75% SO THESE FINDINGS ARE SUGGESTIVE RATHER THAN CONCLUSIVE. Focus groups allowed for qualitative data analyses. Changes from pretest to follow-up were in the expected directions for both online and group with few differences between them. **Effect sizes were moderate to large, showing robust 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 was that in the online group parents encouraged the children to see the co-parent more than the group condition. For Spanish-speaking parents, the pre-test to follow-up changes were large (effect sizes 2.2 to 4.9), showing very substantial improvements for the online condition.**

Finally, in a recent review of over 1,500 exit surveys completed by parents from a large urban center in the US who took the CIB Online course, 86% of parents made mention of specific skills they will use to improve communication and emotional control. Another 78% mention learning new information about the effects of conflict on their child(ren).

In summary, the evidence that the CIB online interventions in general is at least as effective as in-person CIB class is consistent. The skills-based group and online program appear equally effective, with no striking advantages for either. More research with larger samples and better return rates for follow-up surveys will reveal if these preliminary findings hold up.