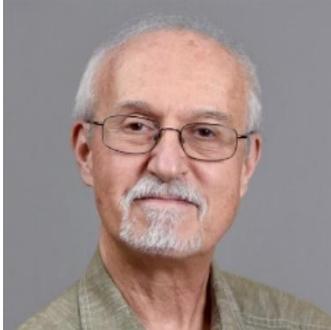


Conversation Corner: Irwin Sandler, PhD

A column throwback to the eNEWS of the 90s



Irwin Sandler, PhD, is a pre-eminent researcher in the field of prevention programs for children and families. For over thirty years, he has conducted efficacy research of established programs and used developmental theory and models of resilience to design interventions for families experiencing major life stressors, primarily in the areas of parental divorce and bereavement from the death of a parent. He has conducted research on stress, social support and coping in children and adolescents in these high stress situations to better understand factors that lead children to adjust well and avoid long-term problem outcomes. Dr. Sandler has published major reviews of the literature on parent education programs in the family courts and in other settings. He has been a member of the working group of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine that produced a landmark review of preventive interventions for children and adolescents and has been a co-author on a paper describing standards of evidence for preventive interventions. He is the co-developer and evaluator of the New Beginnings Program (<https://reachinstitute.asu.edu/programs/new-beginnings>), which has been published in multiple studies demonstrating long-term benefits for children following divorce. Dr. Sandler received a BA from Brooklyn College in 1966 and a PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Rochester in 1971. Subsequently, Dr. Sandler moved to Arizona, where he has been affiliated with Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe ever since. Dr. Sandler is currently a Regents Professor Emeritus and Research Professor with the REACH (Research and Education Advancing Children’s Health) Institute and the Department of Psychology. Dr. Sandler has been an AFCC member since 1990 and is scheduled to present the AFCC webinar “Parent Education for Divorcing and Separating Families: Are We Accomplishing Our Goals?” in October of this year.

AFCC: You’ve been studying the effectiveness of prevention programs for children and families for over a forty-year period. What keeps you going?

Irwin Sandler: I’ve always been interested in the topic of resilience and curious why some children adapt well to a major disruption like divorce while other children are devastated. So beyond finding out why that is, which is sort of an intellectual issue, I’ve wanted to figure out how we can make a difference. We focus on parenting because our research and a lot of other research shows that the quality of parenting after divorce is one of the strongest predictors of how children will do. We have a number of studies about parenting by fathers and mothers showing both are important and both have an effect, but even more importantly, we have research showing that whoever is providing high quality parenting can make a difference, even if the other parent is completely screwing up. This is a strong message to get to share with parents. You can tell a parent that he/she can make a difference. You can say, “I know you are concerned that the other parent may not be disciplining or feeding the way you wish and you cannot do a lot about that, but you can control what you do and you can really make a difference.” We have the data to show that! I think that is an empowering message. I’m still doing this because in the grand scheme of things, our work as researchers is not going to mean anything if we don’t get out there and let people know.

AFCC: We hear a lot about the importance of using evidence-based programs, but what does that really mean in the family law arena? How can true research principles be applied? Is it correct in thinking it's hard to get a completely randomized study?

IS: It's a myth! I know courts often think it's hard to do but it's not. I've completed seven randomized trials involving children's adjustment to divorce and several of them were administered with the court. A randomized trial is the gold standard of research. There are other acceptable designs but a randomized trial is the higher level of evidence. It's what they are doing with the COVID-19 vaccines. It means that with proper analysis a consumer can be confident that the program is effective. I feel strongly that the trial must be randomized to be considered evidence-based but that's not necessarily what is happening in the real world. I have seen some weaker designs and even some ridiculous ones from a scientist's point of view. There is research showing that some parenting after divorce programs have not been beneficial (some even harmful) and we don't want that for families, so it's really important to get this right. A randomized design can, for example, involve providing the new program for some participants and an older program that the court is already using for other participants. If the court does not know if their existing program works, then they are simply providing another plausible alternative. Other design options include using a control group of other online programs, or a wait list control group, which means all participants receive the program (and the benefit) but some participants will get it now and other participants will get it in a few months. Court professionals need to know that randomized trials aren't simple, but they are doable. Frankly, not all parent education works, BUT we can find out which ones do and which ones don't. We can get answers to what court professionals want to know so why wouldn't we do it?

AFCC: If some parenting after divorce programs are helpful while others may not be, how does a family law professional, court, or parent know whether the one they are taking or providing is effective?

IS: Firstly, I think the goal of parent education is right on the mark. Providing this information to parents, strengthening their parenting skills post-divorce, and thereby promoting the wellbeing of children is from my perspective a wonderful thing and I'm glad courts are taking on this responsibility. We just need to make sure that what we are doing, to the extent that we can discern, is effective. There are registries of effective programs. It used to be a federal responsibility but the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) is defunct. Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development based in Colorado might be the best one now. They lay out their criteria for why they are saying whether something is evidence-based and give a level of evidence, such as "model program", "promising program", etc. The public would really benefit if all providers said, "I can do better than that and I'll show you. This is an even better outcome and even better evidence than yours." Unfortunately, that is not the game right now because there is a myth that you cannot evaluate this stuff, which is just not true. These are outcomes that really matter in people's lives and we should treat them the way we treat diabetes or any other physical health outcome.

AFCC: What have you been researching recently? Is there anything that has you particularly excited?

IS: Yes! Back in late January, we received the results on a program I developed with Dr. Sharlene Wolchik, a fellow ASU researcher and professor, and they are the best results I've seen in 30 years for an online program. We modified our ten week in-person parenting after divorce program called the New Beginnings Program to fit an interactive online platform. While the in-person program has always shown promising outcomes, it's pricier and was not reaching as many parents as we'd hoped. The online format allows for broader access and affordability, plus it's shorter. It's still a skills-based program. Every session teaches a skill or tool that parents are then expected to practice at home. Research supports the importance of home practice and strengthening skills with practice. The parents report back on how the skills practice went and, if they had trouble, we give feedback and problem solve with them so they can

figure out how to make it work for their family. We did a randomized trial with 131 families using a wait list control group and I'm really excited about the feedback. We've always gotten great effects on strengthening parenting and reducing child behavior problems for the in-person program but we had spotty effects on reducing interparental conflict. Not with this new online program! We completely redesigned the interparental conflict activities and it worked! Dr. Sanford Braver, another ASU researcher and professor, always got great effects in conflict reduction in his divorced father's program so we incorporated elements from his. The killer for us is that parents reported a reduction in interparental conflict AND the kids did too! They aren't even part of the program. Wow! My dream is that our research is meaningful and this just put us over the moon. I hope this information reaches every divorced family. I want professionals and families to know that parent education works. It can make a difference in the lives of children.

AFCC: You've been an AFCC member since 1990! Would you tell us a bit about how AFCC factored into the work you've done over your career?

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