

Towards
More
Effective
Parent
Education
Programs in
the Courts

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Disclosure: Irwin Sandler is a partner in Family Transitions: Programs that Work which developed and markets the New Beginnings Program

Overview

- Introduction of Irwin and Karey: Our Background and Interest in Parent Education in the Courts
- History and evolution of parent education programs in the courts
 - Describe the origins and variability of parent education
 - Discuss ways to conceptualize how they differ
 - Identify emerging questions about parent education in the courts
 - New opportunities for parent education
 - Public health model of parent education
- Review of evidence that parent education is effective in achieving its goals
 - Levels of evidence
 - For four different goals what is the evidence of effectiveness
 - Interparental conflict
 - Legal conflict
 - Child well-being
 - Quality of parenting


Our Background and Goals for this Webinar

Irwin

Karey

Our goals for the webinar

- Promote discussion
 - Potential for parent education to impact goals of protecting children's well-being; reducing factors that threaten children's well-being and reduce difficulties in the judicial processes of divorce and separation
 - Increase awareness of scientific evidence of effectiveness of parent education to accomplish goals of the court



History of Parent Education in the Courts

Overall Vision for Parent Education

- Parent education developed as part of efforts to move away from a strict adversarial approach to divorce which was seen as harming families and children (Shepard, 2004)
- Part of an effort to develop a more collaborative approach that helps parent better manage the divorce process legal process and protect their children from problems that often follow divorce
- Developers of first parent education program describe the goals as
“helping parents understand the emotional components of divorce” to “give parents the knowledge to keep children out of the middle of their battles and reinforces the fact that children will continue to have an ongoing relationship with both parents” (Roeder-Esser, 1994)

Evolution of Parent Education In the Courts

First developed in the 1970s in
Kansas

Rapid growth in the last 2 decades of
20th century

Well established in the court but stalled
growth since then (Salem 2013)

46% of states have some form of
mandatory parent education (Pollet and
Lombreglia (2008)

Parent Education Programs Differ Widely On Multiple Dimensions (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998, 1999)

Goals

Content

Approach (skills focused vs. information focused)

Provider - court provided and community provided

Length - range of 1 - 36 hours; median of 2 hours for court provided programs and 4 hours for community provided

Mode of presentation - in-person vs. online

What parents are involved - all parents or selected parents

How parents involved - Mandated, suggested, voluntarily offered



Reviews
find multiple
goals of
Parent
Education
Programs

To focus parents on child needs in the context of divorce;

To enhance parental resilience in managing stresses and parenting efforts;

To educate parents regarding the impact of interparental conflict on children

To provide strategies for parents to decrease child exposure to conflict

To improve coparenting efforts

Content of Parent Education Programs

Content most often covered - importance of interparental cooperation and typical post-divorce reactions of children.

Content covered somewhat less - skills for improving quality of parenting and reducing conflict, options for dispute resolution and parenting time.

Topics covered least were the nuts-and-bolts of legal issues concerning child support and legal rights of parents.

Divorce
Education
Intervention
Model as a
Framework for
Court Planning
(Blaisure &
Geasler, 2000)

- “Model that court systems can use to determine the level of programming that fits their goals for divorce education and their available resources (e.g., time, money, presenters’ qualifications)”
- Model is designed to help courts
 - Clarify their goals
 - Identify the level of programming needed to achieve their goals
 - Identify if available resources can support the desired level

Identify 3 Levels of Parent Education that Differ on 7 Dimensions

- ✓Goals of the program
- ✓Personnel required
- ✓Court resources that are required
- ✓Strategies employed in the program
- ✓Parent involvement required
- ✓Outcomes that can be expected
- ✓Limitations



Divorce Education Intervention Model

- **Level 1 - Basic information**

Goal	Communicate basic information and recommendations on parent, child and court issues
Personnel	Skilled in presenting information and encouraging discussion
Resources	Staff time and support and administrative; lowest level of resources required
Outcome	Reach large numbers in little time to convey information and awareness of resources
Examples	2 - 3 hour education programs; brochures

Divorce Education Intervention Model

- **Level 2 - Skill Building**

Goal	Develop or enhance coparental communication and conflict resolution behaviors.
Personnel	Skilled in group dynamics and facilitation, tailoring recommendations, and recognizing psychological problems and making referrals
Resources	Requires personnel with additional training, time and money for longer program
Outcome	Difficulties resolved or couple referred for therapy
Examples	8 - 12 session group programs

Divorce Education Intervention Model

- **Level 3 - Brief Focused**

Goal	Reduce conflict between Provide individualized parents in high-conflict therapeutic interventions. parenting situations.
Personnel	Skilled in conducting more intensive small group interventions
Resources	Requires more resources for more intensive multi-session interventions
Outcome	Difficulties are resolved or individuals/couples are referred for therapy. Individually designed plans for overcoming major problems
Examples	6 - 18 week group programs

High Levels
of
Consumer
Satisfaction
But
Emerging
Questions

What is the evidence for effectiveness of parent education?

Questioning of whether parent education programs unfairly blame or shame parents for child problems (Schaefer, 2010)

Judicial discussion on are the limits or proper role of the court to intervene in family matters (parental autonomy) (Kierstead, 2011)

Emerging Questions

- Massachusetts Probate and Family Court suspension of parent education (McDonough, July, 2021)
 - Lack of evidence of effectiveness of parent education produced desired goal
 - There is no requirement that the program must be evidenced-based. Evidence-based programs have a high likelihood of producing positive results on the targeted issues, have been carefully evaluated, and generate evidence that the program would improve child, parent, and/or family functioning.
 - Dissatisfaction with court providers

Four
Developments
Since 2000
Provide New
Opportunities
for Parent
Education for
Divorce

1. Encouraging evidence of effectiveness of parenting programs with families experiencing other stressors - bereavement, parental depression or substance abuse, poverty as well as normative transitions (Sandler et al. 2015) supports potential effectiveness of parent education with divorced families.
2. Increased research on effectiveness of parent education with divorced and separating families - presented below

Developments Since 2000 Provide New Opportunities for Parent Education for Divorce

3. Advances in approaches to interventions

- Evidence for effectiveness of brief interventions
- Evidence that length of program does not predict effectiveness (Fackrell, 2011)
- Development of effective online programs for parents and children

4. Increased evidence on key risk and protective factors that might be specifically targeted through parent education programs

- Interparental conflict
- Quality of parenting by mothers
- Quality of parenting by fathers

Public Health Model of Parent Education (Shepard, 2004; Salem et al., 2013)

- **Public health perspective on parent education**
 - **Divorce is a public health problem for children - Children are at increased risk for multiple problems following divorce**
 - **Most children are resilient**
 - **But there is an increased risk for mental health (25 - 35% Hetherington, 1992) and substance abuse problems, peer problems, academic achievement which can last into adulthood**
 - **Parent education is a court based approach to proactively promote the well being of children and prevent development of child problems**

Public health perspective is complementary to judicial goals and values

- Goal of promoting well being of children following divorce identified as a common goal of parent education programs identified in national surveys
- Protecting the well-being of children is a critical criterion for judicial decisions on issues such as custody or parenting time
- Judicial decision impact risk factors for child problem outcomes
- Family processes such as conflict and parent child relations effect judicial processes
- Potential for public health approach to facilitate the judicial process as well as lead to improved child outcomes

Public Health Model is Based on Evidence of What Works

- Strategies are only accepted based on evidence
 - Evidence of the nature and distribution of the problem - Children of divorce at elevated risk
 - Evidence of causal processes that lead to the problem - desirable but not totally necessary
 - Evidence of effectiveness of the intervention (i.e. Parent Education)
 - John Snow - Broad Street Pump
 - Corona Virus
- Widely successful - Clean water; Fluoridation of water, vaccinations; smoking reduction; healthy diet and exercise
 - Increasingly in behavioral health (National Research Council/Institute of Medicine, 2009)

Matrix For Courts To Evaluate Adoption of Parent Education – Using Public Health Model

Population Receiving Parent Education	Resources Required of the Court	Resources Required of Parents	Potential Benefits to Children and to the Judicial Process
Universal			
Selective			
Indicated			

Universal Programs – (Seat belts; Smoking Prevention; Social emotional learning in schools)

Population receiving parent education	Potential Benefits - If the program is effective	Parent Resources	Court Resources
<p>Universal Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered to all divorcing parents with children • Many people don't need it but good reminder for all and particularly helps those who need it • Seat belts, fluoridation, socio-emotional learning in schools • Might be mandated • May be informational • May be skill or motivation building 	<p>Family benefits</p> <p><u>Informational programs</u> would promote “informed consumer” of court services and awareness of needed family resources</p> <p><u>Skill-building</u> could reduce levels of interparental conflict, lead to stronger parent-child relations for both parents and reduce child problem outcomes</p> <p>Court benefits: Reduce later use of more expensive court services and re-litigation</p>	<p>In-person: Time and effort to attend the program - typically 2 - 4 hours</p> <p>Online: Most accessible when and where parent chooses. Typically 2 - 4 hours in length</p>	<p>In person: If delivered by court costs include personnel, space, administration. If delivered in community cost is oversight and administration.</p> <p>Online: Cost is oversight and administration</p>

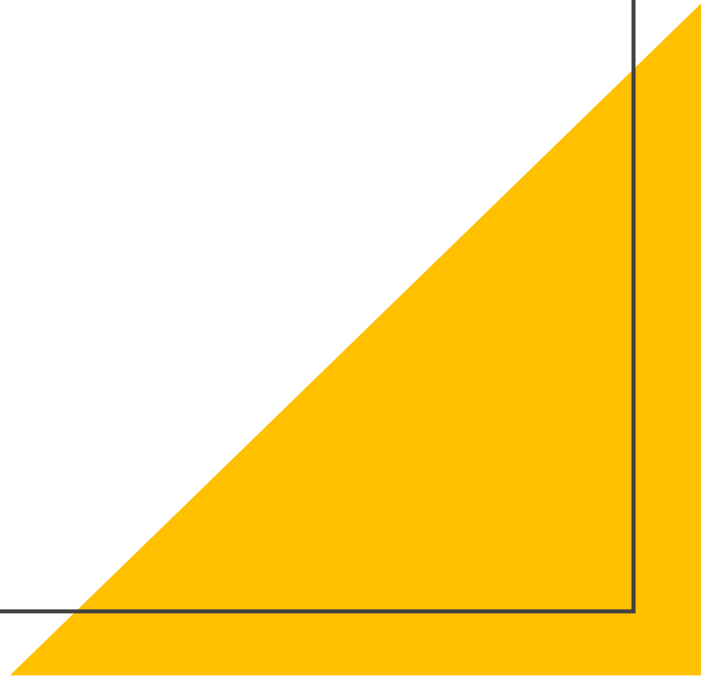
Selective Programs – (Statins for high cholesterol)

Population receiving parent education	Potential Benefits - If the program is effective	Parent Resources	Court Resources
<p>Court selected: Judicial discretion - “suggested” or mandated for parents who are having difficulty in reaching or in keeping legal agreements or in co-parenting</p> <p>Parent selected: could also be offered to parents who choose to engage in a non-adversarial divorce process such as the Collaborative Divorce Project (Pruett et al., 2005).</p>	<p>Family benefits: Skill building programs might reduce interparental conflict and increase parent-child relationships and improve child well being.</p> <p>Court benefits: Could be a complementary resource for FDR services Could be part of a package with other comprehensive services Reduce re-litigation</p>	<p>In-person: Time and effort to attend the program. Would vary depending on evidence of number of sessions needed to produce desired effect. But more is not necessarily better effects!</p> <p>Online: Less time than in-person programs and reduce logistical barriers to attendance. Likely to be considerably less expensive than in-person program.</p>	<p>In person: Depending on court or community delivered. Administrative and oversight of program</p> <p>Online: Oversight of the program</p>

Indicated Programs – Drunk driving class

Population receiving parent education	Potential Benefits - If the program is effective	Parent Resources	Court Resources
<p>Smaller subset of families who are engaged in behaviors that the court sees as harmful to children, such as interparental violence or chronic high levels of conflict that put their children in the middle. More intense and lengthier interventions are required although parent education programs might be a useful supplement.</p>	<p>Parent benefit: Help in reducing behaviors that harm children and source of parental distress</p> <p>Court benefit: Resource to manage high risk situation that puts children in harms way. Potential to reduce later court procedures and re-litigation</p>	<p>Varies depending on evidence for effective dosage</p>	<p>Referral for services with cost likely assigned to parents.</p>

Public Health Model
Depends on Evidence of
What Works



Do parent education programs for divorced parents to achieve outcomes of interest to the court?

Review of the Evidence

Four Outcomes of Interest

Did the program....?

- ✓ reduce interparental conflict
- ✓ reduce legal conflict
- ✓ strengthen quality of parenting by mothers or fathers
- ✓ improve children's well-being



Minimal Standards of Evidence

1. study design was experimental or quasi-experimental
 - control group - randomized or non-randomized
 2. researchers conducted statistical analyses to compare the effects of the program to a control/comparison group,
 - + accounted for baseline level of the outcomes
- Also described...
 - active or inactive control/comparison
 - short- and/or long-term effects
 - included mothers and/or fathers,
 - reported reliability of measures
 - reports from anyone other than the participating parent

We did not critique the method of randomization nor quality of measures (e.g., validity).

Procedure

- Google Scholar + Psych Info [*key words: divorce, parent education, program, intervention*]
- Backward + forward citation searching
- Contacted authors of published studies to ask for new evaluations

Identified: **45** evaluations of **29** parent education programs

A note about Fackrell et al., 2011

- 19 studies (with control group)
- overall significant moderate positive effect ($d = .39$)
- Limitations: only 4 were true experimental designs; not all peer-reviewed; only court-affiliated

In contrast, we...

- Included studies after 2011
- Included court-affiliated + those not currently used by courts
- Examine which programs changes factors related to child well-being, NOT summarize overall effect size
- Identified programs that met study design standards of existing clearinghouse/registries

Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)

- 24 evaluations of 13 parent education programs
 - 12 programs - single randomized trial
 - 1 programs - four randomized trials
- Most included both mothers and fathers
 - 2 fathers only | 1 mothers only
- Active vs. inactive control group
 - 5 active control | 7 inactive control
- Measures and reporters
 - All but 2 included reliability information
 - 2 used court records | 4 used other reporters








Quasi-Experimental Designs (QEDs)



- 20 evaluations of 16 parent education programs
 - Only 2 evaluated in more than one trial
- Measures and reporters
 - Both reported reliability information
 - Both used court records and participating parents' report

Quality of Parenting 5/6

RCTs








-  increased quality of parenting (relationship quality, consistent discipline)
-  decreased coercive parenting
-  decreased coercive parenting + improved effective parenting + prevented a decay of quality of parenting over time
-  P reduced inadequate parenting (for younger children only)
-  P → reduced conflict → reduced negative changes in parent-child relationships

QEDs



-  C did not improve parenting

Interparental Conflict 8/15

RCTs



- **NBP**
 -  **CBP** reduced levels of conflict [parent + child report]
 - **NBP** reduced conflict (*for Non-Hispanic White fathers*) [father report]
- **DFL** reduced frequency and intensity of conflict [mother + father report]
- **F1**  reduced feelings of caught in the middle [child report]
- **M1**  reduced mothers' loyalty conflict behaviors [mother report]
- **PI**  **WS** reduced conflict [parent report]
- **CF**  reduced conflict [parent report]
- 
- 

QEDs

- **CIB/CIM** reduced conflict behaviors [parent report]
- **CF** 
 -  reduced conflict [parent report]
 - reduced ex-spouse's triangulating behavior (*for those with high conflict at entry*) [parent report]


Legal Conflict 4/6

RCTs

- FTG reduced # of pleadings + minute entries, + hearing time (if the mother had an attorney) [court records]
-  increased use of mediation, decreased custody evaluations and mandated or advised services [court records]
-  improved attitudes toward compromise and cooperation and reduced phone calls [attorney report]
- PTP increased legal conflict (for those who had a waiting period); more likely to fail to appear for hearing [court records]



QEDs

- CIM/CID reduced relitigation [court records]
-  rial also reduced relitigation (for parents with high baseline conflict and low baseline adaptive parenting [court records])

Child Well-being 8/12

RCTs

- ✓ **P**
 - reduced aggression, behavior problems (high baseline), clinically significant mental health problems, internalizing problems, diagnosed mental health disorders, depression, acting out behavior [child, mother, father, teacher] (some moderators*)
- ✓ **L** reduced internalizing problems (for high baseline) [mother and father report]
- ✓ **C** → reduced coercive parenting → child adjustment problems [father report]
- ✓ **C**
 - reduced internalizing [child report] and externalizing problems [mother, teacher, and observer report]
 - PTC → effective parenting → boys' maladjustment [child report]
- ✓ **G** reduced anxiety [child report] + internalizing and externalizing problems [parent report]
- ✓ **PWS** reduced emotional and behavior problems [parent report]
- ✓ **TP** reduced intensity and number of behavior problems [parent report]
- ✓ **IP** → increased maternal support of father, reduced conflict, changed parent-child relationships → behavior problems [parent report]

QEDs

- ✗ **IM/CIB** did not improve child well-being
- ✗ **F** did not improve child well-being

Minimal

Standards of Evidence

Two Clearinghouses/Registries

Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development

- Promising Programs | 1 RCT or 2 QEDs
- Model Programs | 2 RCTs
- Model Plus Programs | independent evaluation

California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC)

- *Well-Supported* | 2 RCTs
- *Supported* | 1 RCT
- *Promising* | 1 QED
- ~~*Evidence Fails to Demonstrate Effect*~~
- ~~*Concerning Practice*~~

****study design only****

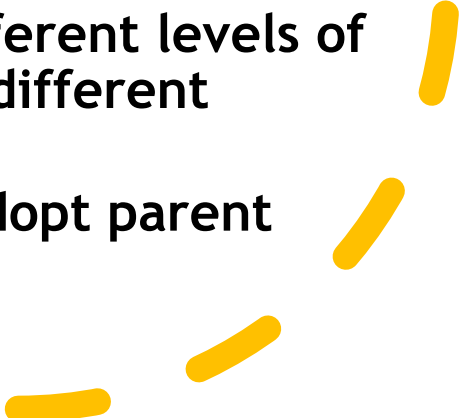
Organization	Standards of Evidence (*study design only*)	Programs with Significant Effects:			
		Quality of Parenting	Interparental Conflict	Legal Conflict	Child Well-being
Blueprints for Health Youth Development	Model Plus	-	-	-	-
	Model	NBP	NBP	-	NBP
	Promising	FTC, PTC, FTTP, CDP	DFL, FTG, MEB, PP-PWS, CDP, CIM/CIB, CF	FTG, CDP, CIM/CIB, CF	DFL, FTC, PTC, CSG, PP-PWS, FTTP, CDP
California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare	Well-supported	NBP	NBP	-	NBP
	Supported	FTC, PTC, FTTP, CDP	DFL, FTG, MEB, CDP, PP-PWS	FTG, CDP	DFL, FTC, PTC, CSG, PP-PWS, FTTP, CDP
	Promising	-	CIM/CIB, CF	CIM/CIB, CF	-

Disclaimer: this is for illustration purposes only - these organizations have NOT endorsed these programs

Implications of the Research Evidence

- post-divorce parent education programs have considerable promise to impact outcomes of interest to the court
- Of the 13 programs evaluated with an RCT, positive impact was reported:
 - 5 on quality of parenting
 - 6 on interparental conflict
 - 2 on legal conflict
 - 8 on child well-being
- Only some have been offered through the family courts
- Most have not been evaluated using either an RCT or QED

Summary

- This is a good time for change: to reconsider parent education programs in the courts that are:
 - Within Court Resources and Judicial authority
 - Meet goals for children and families
 - Meet goals for courts
 - Public health model puts an emphasis on evidence of effectiveness
 - For different populations
 - For different goals
 - State of evidence
 - Rigorous evaluation can be done including on programs in the court
 - Current state of evidence shows different levels of evidence for different programs on different outcomes
 - Provides a data base for courts to adopt parent education that meets their goals
- 

Program Name	Reference(s)
New Beginnings Program (NBP)	Wolchik et al., 1993, 2000, 2002, 2013, under review; Sandler et al., 2018, 2020; Tein et al., 2018
Dads for Life (DFL)	Braver et al., 2005; Cookston et al., 2007
Fathering Through Change (FTC)	DeGarmo & Jones, 2019
Parenting Through Change (PTC)	Forgatch & Degarmo, 1999; DeGarmo & Forgatch, 2005
ProudToParent (PTP)	Rudd et al., 2015, 2017
Family Transitions Guide (FTG)	Braver et al., 2016
Children Caught in the Middle Questionnaire (CIM-Q)	Kurkowski et al., 1993
Mailed Educational Booklet (MEB)	Arbuthnot et al., 1996
Parental Component of Children's Support Group (CSG)	Stolberg & Mahler, 1994
Louisville, Kentucky Parent Education (LKPE)	Thoennes & Pearson, 1999
Mothers and fathers Plus - Parenting when Separated Programme (PP-PWS)	Keating et al., 2016
Family Transitions Triple P (FTTP)	Stallman & Sanders, 2014
Collaborative Divorce Project (CDP)	Pruett et al., 2005; Pruett & Barker, 2010
Children-in-Between / Children-in-the Middle (CIB/CIM)	Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Kramer et al., 1998
Children First (CF)	Jewell et al., 2017; Kramer & Washo, 1993; Kramer & Kowal, 1998
Maricopa Experimental Parenting Program (MEPP)	deLusé & Braver, 2015
Kids in Divorce & Separation (K.I.D.S.)	Shifflett & Cummings, 1999
Utah Divorce Education Pilot Program	Criddle et al., 2003
Multisite Parent Education	Thoennes & Pearson, 1999
Egokitzen	Martínez-Pampliega et al., 2015
Single Parents' Support Group (SPSG)	Stolberg & Garrison, 1985
The Orientation for Divorcing Parents (ODP)	Buehler et al., 1992
Kankakee County parent education program (unnamed)	McClure, 2002
Parents Forever	Becher et al., 2018
Family Information Sessions (FIS)	Ellis & Anderson, 2003
Co-Parenting for Resilience (CPR)	Cox et al., 2021
Parents Achieving in Collaborative Teams (PACT)	Brown et al., 2009
Parenting for Divorced Fathers program	Devlin et al., 1992
Start Making It Liveable for Everyone (SMILE)	Soderman, 1996