



EVIDENCE-BASED DOCUMENTATION SUMMARY RELATED TO THE eNEW BEGINNINGS PROGRAM (eNBP)

Overview. The eNBP is the online version of the in-person, group New Beginnings Program (NBP), which has been recognized by four national and international clearinghouses as an evidence-based or a model program. These clearinghouses review all the evidence of program effectiveness prior to providing their recognition. The clearinghouses and their designation of the NBP as evidence-based include: Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development (Model Program); California Evidence-based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (Well-supported by research evidence); Early Intervention Foundation – United Kingdom (Level 4 which is their highest rating that “recognises programmes with evidence of a long-term positive impact through multiple rigorous evaluations.”); and Early Intervention Framework for Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Well-being - Scottish Government (Rating for Evidence 4 [1-5 scale]. The NBP is the only parenting program for divorced and separated families that has been recognized by multiple national and international clearinghouses as having such a high level of evidence of effectiveness.

Given that the eNBP is the online version of the NBP, we discuss findings from our randomized controlled trials that demonstrate that the NBP improves parenting and reduces child mental health problems. However, because an in-person version of a program is evidence-based does not mean that the online program is evidence-based. We describe the published evidence from a randomized controlled trial that shows that the eNBP reduced interparental conflict, strengthened parent-child relationships, improved effective discipline and reduced child mental health problems. It is the only online program for divorced and separated parents with such evidence.

Effectiveness of the in-person NBP. The in-person, group NBP teaches all the skills included in the eNBP: skills to improve parent-child relationship quality, to increase effective discipline and to decrease children’s exposure to interparental conflict. The NBP targeted these post-divorce processes based on an extensive literature documenting concurrent and longitudinal relations between them and children’s post-divorce adjustment (see Wolchik et al., 2007). Program-induced improvements in parent-child relationship quality and effective discipline and decreases in interparental conflict were theorized to decrease children’s mental health problems. Three randomized controlled trials involving over 1,800 children found positive effects to strengthen parent-child relationship quality and effective discipline and to reduce children’s mental health problems immediately after the course (Sandler et al., 2018, 2020; Tein et al., 2018; Wolchik et al., 1993; 2000).

The most recent trial was a Court-Community-University collaboration to evaluate the effects of the NBP as delivered in four courts in Arizona (Sandler et al., 2020). The collaboration involved the presentation of a 12-minute video inviting participation in the NBP on a voluntary basis to parents attending the Parent Information Program that is mandated for all divorcing and separating parents in Arizona. Supported by a grant from the National Institute of Drug Abuse, the NBP was delivered by trained community-based providers and evaluated by the research team headed by the course co-developers (Sandler and Wolchik). The randomized controlled trial evaluation included 830 divorced, separating or never married and separating parents and their 1,638 children ages 3–18. Parents were randomly assigned to the NBP or a two-session program that presented information and guided discussion about the same skills included in the NBP without the interactive skill building and home practice components. The study found that the NBP was significantly more effective than the comparison program in strengthening the quality of the parent-child relationship, improving effective discipline and reducing child mental health problems and that the positive

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effects lasted 10 months later. The positive effects of the NBP were found for fathers as well as mothers (Sandler et al., 2018; 2020).

In another one of the trials (Wolchik et al., 2000), long-term follow-ups were conducted to assess NBP effects six and 15 years later. This study included 240 9- to 12-year-olds and included three conditions: the in-person group NBP, a dual component condition in which mothers participated in the NBP and children participated in a coping focused program, and a literature control condition. Reductions in externalizing problems were found immediately after the NBP and at the six-month follow-up. Also, the proportion of children scoring *below* the clinical cut point for internalizing problems or externalizing problems was significantly higher in the NBP as compared to the literature control condition immediately after the NBP and at the 6-month follow-up.

At the six-year follow-up, when youth were in mid-to-late adolescence, those whose parents had participated in the NBP had fewer externalizing problems (parent/adolescent and teacher report) and internalizing problems (parent/adolescent report). Adolescents whose parents participated in the NBP also reported less alcohol and drug use and fewer sexual partners than those in the control condition (Wolchik et al., 2002, 2007). The public health significance of these effects is illustrated by the course-induced decreases in serious problems: the NBP led to a 34% decrease in the prevalence of diagnosed mental disorder in the last year (23% control versus 15% NBP) and a 61% decrease in the number of sexual partners in the past year (1.7 control versus .65 NBP). The NBP also led to improvements in multiple aspects of competence at the 6-year follow-up, including higher grade point average (35% more of the adolescents whose parents were in the NBP had an A or B average than those in the control condition), more adaptive coping, higher self-esteem, and higher expectations about educational goals and job aspirations (Sigal et al., 2012; Wolchik et al., 2002, 2007). Multiple studies have shown that the effects of the NBP to improve parent-child relationship quality and effective discipline accounted for its impact on children's outcomes (Bonds et al., 2015; Tein et al., 2004; Wolchik et al., 2007; Zhou et al., 2008).

At the 15-year follow-up, when the offspring were in young adulthood, the NBP led to a lower incidence of internalizing disorders (e.g., major depression) (Wolchik et al., 2013), less use of mental health services, and less involvement with the criminal justice system (Herman et al., 2015). For males, the NBP reduced drug use and substance use disorders (Wolchik et al., 2013). In addition, the NBP led to fewer problematic beliefs about the divorce (e.g., less painful feelings about the divorce) (Christopher et al., 2017) and for males, more negative attitudes toward divorce (Wolchik et al., 2019). The NBP also improved competencies, including greater self-esteem, academic competence, work functioning (Wolchik et al., 2021) and more positive attitudes toward parenting (Mahrer et al., 2014). The public health significance of the benefits at this follow-up is illustrated by large effects to decrease number of days in jail and use of mental health services in the past year (Herman et al., 2015).

Despite the remarkable short- and long-term effects of the NBP, it has not been widely adopted by family courts. This lack of adoption appears to be due to the in-person, small-group format, which requires significant infrastructure, extensive training of leaders and ongoing technical assistance to deliver with sustained high fidelity and quality. The in-person NBP is expensive to deliver (estimated cost of \$633 per parent; Herman et al., 2015), which limits the number of parents who can use the course as well as the ability of courts to provide it as a sustainable resource for parents. To make the NBP affordable we developed the online version of the NBP, the eNBP. Below, we present evidence for the effectiveness of the eNBP.

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Evidence for the effectiveness of eNBP. The eNBP is the online version of the NBP. It teaches all the skills that are taught in the NBP. In addition to these skills, we added activities from the Dads for Life program that had previously demonstrated the strongest effects in the literature to reduce interparental conflict in divorced and separated families (Cookston et al., 2007). Funded by two small business grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, we adapted the NBP into an asynchronous, completely online version. We preserved all of the skills taught in the NBP and developed highly interactive approaches to teaching these skills online.

As described in our peer reviewed publication in the *Family Court Review* (Wolchik et al, 2022), we conducted a randomized controlled trial using a sample of 131 parents who were randomized to eNBP (N = 81) or wait-list control condition (N = 50). The sample consisted of 60.3%mothers/stepmothers, 37.4% fathers/ stepfathers, 2.3% other caregivers). Parents were recruited nationally using Qualtrics, a leading-edge sample acquisition technology. Pre-test and post-test assessments were obtained from the parents and one child over the age of 11 using reliable and valid measures of interparental conflict, quality of parent-child relationship, effective discipline, child mental health problems and child prosocial behavior. Because the children did not participate in the course and because parents may have been more likely than their children to report a positive change given that they invested time and effort into the program, children's reports were essential to assess if the eNBP had positive effects across reporter. This is the only randomized trial of an online parenting course for divorced and separated parents to assess both parent and child reports of outcomes. We compared the eNBP and wait-list conditions at post-test on parent and child reports of the variables using analysis of covariance, controlling for the pre-test score and covariates.

The results found strong support for positive effects of the eNBP on both parent and child reports on multiple outcomes. At post-test, parents in the eNBP condition reported significantly less conflict than those in the wait list condition. The results were particularly strong for parents who were at the mean or higher on conflict when they started the course. Child reports of interparental conflict at post-test confirmed parent reports that the eNBP decreased interparental conflict.

The results also indicated a positive effect of the eNBP to improve the quality of parent-child relationships. For parents who reported higher rejection at course entry, the eNBP reduced rejection at post-test as compared with those in the wait list condition. For parent report, compared to the waitlist condition, the eNBP led to more open communication at post-test. At post-test, children in the eNBP reported less rejection than those in the waitlist condition.

There were also significant effects of the eNBP to increase consistency of discipline and follow-through. At post-test, parents in the eNBP reported higher consistency of discipline and greater follow-through than those in the wait list condition. For child reports, females whose parents were in the eNBP reported greater consistency of discipline at post-test than females in the wait list condition. For children who reported that their parents were low on follow-through at course entry those in the eNBP reported that their parents had significantly higher follow-through than those in the wait list condition at post-test.

At post-test, both parents in the eNBP and their children reported lower internalizing problems than those in the wait list condition. Child reports from male but not female children in the eNBP condition also showed lower externalizing problems at post-test than those in the wait list condition.

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In summary, according to *both parents and children*, the randomized controlled trial showed that as compared to a wait list control condition, the eNBP lowered interparental conflict, improved quality of the parent-child relationship, increased effective discipline and reduced child mental health problems. The findings from this evaluation of the eNBP are similar to findings from evaluations of the in-person NBP on measures of parenting and child mental health problems. The effects of the eNBP to reduce parent and child reports of interparental conflict are considerably stronger than the effects found in the three randomized controlled trials of the in-person NBP. The effects of the eNBP to reduce both parent and child reports of interparental conflict are the only such effects found in evaluations of online parenting courses for divorced and separated families.

We believe that the positive effects of the eNBP can be attributed to three main factors. First, the course components were derived directly from the in-person NBP, which has shown remarkable effects to improve parent-child relationships and reduce child behavior problems up to 15 years later. Second, we added a component to reduce interparental conflict that had been found to be successful in another parenting course for divorced and separated parents. Third, the interactive activities in eNBP were highly successful in engaging parents and getting them to practice the skills they learned in the course with their children at home.

The findings from this evaluation of eNBP contrast to the findings from other randomized trials of online parenting courses for divorced and separated families. For example, a recent randomized trial compared two of the most popularly used online parent education courses to a no course control group. The two online courses were selected because previous studies had provided some support for their effectiveness in family law settings. The results of this rigorous randomized controlled trial showed several small effects of the courses. However, these effects were not significant when methodological adjustments were made to control for chance findings. The authors of this independent evaluation concluded that, "Overall, the findings do not provide strong support for the impact of the two brief online parenting programs investigated" (Tomlinson et al., 2022, pg. 11).

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