

Community-based Divorce Education Programmes: Short-term and Longer Term Impacts

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Surveys of mandatory parent education in the USA (M J Geasler and K R Blaisure, 'A review of divorce education programme materials' (1998) 47 *Family Relations* 167–175; M J Geasler and K R Blaisure, '1998 Nationwide survey of court-connected divorce education programmes' (1999) 37 *Family and Conciliation Courts Review* 36–63; S L Pollet and M Lombreglia, 'A nationwide survey of mandatory parent education' (2008) 46(2) *Family Court Review* 375–394) have demonstrated the positive impact of well-designed, evidence-based programmes on children and families. Divorce education programmes for parents are now required in many jurisdictions in 46 states in the USA (Pollet and Lombreglia, above) and in several English-speaking countries around the world (K Blaisure, *Divorce intervention and prevention: Comparison of policy initiatives in England/Wales and the US* (The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2003)). Although programmes are provided in many places, very few of them have a strong, positive, evidence base that would encourage their application in locations where either no programme exists or existing programmes have not been demonstrated to be effective.

'Parenting Children of Divorce' is a parent education programme focused on child custody and visitation (residence and contact) disputes provided by Family Life Council of Greensboro North Carolina for over 21 years. Currently, attendance at the programme is required by the local courts for all parents who file a custody or visitation action (Family Life Council, *About the Family Life Council*, http://www.flcgo.com/Resources/About_us.htm#history (last accessed 29 May 2009)). While the programme has been evaluated internally, a detailed evaluation of the programme was critical to updating curriculum to align it with current best practices, continuing agency funding, and securing ongoing support from the courts. The purpose of the research was to improve and update existing evaluation instrumentation, provide more detailed data on programme strengths, areas for growth, and overall effectiveness, potentially provide positive data that would allow for programme generalisability and marketing, and develop clear recommendations for making alterations to the curriculum or delivery method.

Background

The development of community-based divorce education programmes began in North America in the late 1970s and by the beginning of the new millennium more than 50% of counties in the USA had such a programme. The goals of divorce education programmes are to provide information on: children and their adjustment; the need for parental cooperation; management of conflict; and some include legal information and court procedures (Blaisure 2003, above). In a widely cited survey of court-connected divorce education programmes, Geasler and Blaisure (above) found that the average programme was four hours in length, may be completed in one or two sessions, costs about US\$ 30, was mandatory in about 65% of US counties, and included a videotaped presentation, lecture and group discussion. Programme evaluation across the country has consisted primarily of exit questionnaires, which demonstrate high participant satisfaction even among parents who resent mandatory attendance (Blaisure 2003, above). Rigorous studies of programmes (with and without control groups) have been few but demonstrate: children at high risk were most positively affected; programmes emphasising teaching and practicing skills demonstrated the most effective longer-term outcomes; and attending a programme early in the process of divorce may reduce court hearing and filings around custody-related matters (see Blaisure 2003, above). A more recent review of divorce education programmes reaffirmed many of the results of earlier studies (Pollet and Lombreglia 2008, above).

The Family Life Council of Greensboro began in 1968 when volunteers from a variety of community services began meeting to discuss how the Greensboro community could work to strengthen families. Volunteers planned and implemented a range of educational programmes on early childhood development and family life education. In 1988, funds were received from United Way to establish the Parenting Children of Divorce (PCOD) programme, a series of classes for parents experiencing separation and divorce and this programme was the first of its kind to be offered in the Southeastern USA. In the early part of this decade the Parenting Children of Divorce (PCOD) programme became required by the 18th Judicial District Court in Guilford County for all parents/guardians involved in custody disputes but

the programme is still open to others involved with children undergoing relationship dissolution. During the 2005/2006 fiscal year, it served 434 participants led by 72 volunteer and staff members (Family Life Council, *About the Family Life Council*, see above). The course lasts for a total of 4 hours and there are two delivery options one 4 hour Saturday session or two 2 hour Thursday sessions. The current cost was US\$ 40 per attendee. Information in the course included: child development; social, psychological, financial, and legal aspects of divorce for parents and children; strategies for communicating; and keeping children out of parental conflict; building a new relationship with a former spouse; and continuing effective parenting. Participants engaged in lecture, discussion, and watched videos. The course was co-facilitated by one mental health professional and one attorney, thus providing two important perspectives on the issues participants are most likely facing during their custody dispute.

The PCOD programme offered by the Family Life Council appears to represent an 'average' divorce education programme when compared to the best currently available data. This representativeness allows for not only conclusions to be drawn about this programme, but allows for larger conclusions about these types of programmes, the experiences of the participant population, and relative strengths/growth areas for similar programmes.

Methods

Through agency-researcher collaboration the research team examined the existing research methodology and evaluation tools and developed a new methodological strategy and accompanying tools. The existing programme evaluation included a post-programme questionnaire and a 6 month follow up. The researchers added some questions to the existing post programme evaluation and 6 month follow-up about selected demographics (gender of parent & child(ren), ages of children, used a 4 point scale for critical issues (1 = strongly agree – 4 strongly disagree), and included questions about other professionals with whom the parent has been involved. This project also added a pre-programme participant questionnaire and a twelve month follow-up, similar in content to the 6 month. The pre-programme questionnaire was distributed by the agency to participants when they arrived at the programme, completed and collected before the material was presented. The post programme evaluation was distributed immediately upon completion of the programme and collected on site.

Because of time limitation, the research was essentially cross-sectional; therefore, all participants who completed 6 month and 12 month questionnaires had attended the course between and/or during the spring and/or fall of 2008. Although the original proposal had included conducting interviews with participants who had been to the course 12 months or more prior, timelines for the research changed due to budget cutbacks, which

meant that a questionnaire was mailed instead. The participant pool for the 12 month questionnaire was based on previous respondents to the agency, which meant attrition outside the researchers control affected the pool of potential participants.

The initial estimated participation for this study was based on Family Life Council's experience with providing and evaluating this programme, but some issues with timing and funding created a smaller overall participant pools. Pre and post programme questionnaires were issued to all attendees in both the two Thursday evening and one Saturday sessions of the programme for 2 ½ months (four total sessions), participation was 100% since questionnaires were distributed and collected on site, and the overall number of participants was 76. The agency mailed 96 six and 12 month follow-up questionnaires and a total of 23 were analysed (24% response rate).

Results of Pre-post Test Questionnaires

Data were available from three Saturday sessions (n = 65) and one Thursday night session (n = 13). Referrals to the course were from: attorneys (38.4%); court/judges (38.4%); mediators (15%); and friends/family (5.5%). There were more female attendees (57%) than male (43%), which were the result of grandmothers, stepmothers, and other female guardians (3%) attending the programme. With regard to marital status, 35% of attendees were 'never married', 33% 'separated', and 32 per cent 'divorced'. 'Never married' parents were the largest individual group, but when most attendees had been married at some point (separated and divorced combined into 'ever married'). Separated parents were apart less than one year (8 months), divorced parents had been apart more than 5 years (6½ years median), but never married parents data was inconclusive. Sixty-six per cent of parents had only one child involved in the dispute, 25% had two children, and 7% had three or more.

Pre-test

One of the purposes of the pre-test was to establish baseline data with regard to some of the key outcome variables: seeing the importance of having a positive relationship with child(ren)'s other parent; exposing children to less conflict, feeling more confident in managing conflict with child(ren)'s other parent; and reducing feelings of hostility to children's other parent. All data was collected using a 4 point scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4), but results were recorded for analyses into a two-point scale combining those who 'strongly agree/agree' into an 'agree' category and those who 'disagree/strongly disagree' into a 'disagree' category.

The quantitative data demonstrated several key issues about parents prior to taking the course: they understood the importance of a positive relationship (95% agree); were concerned about the level of conflict to which their child(ren) are exposed (83% agree); were concerned about the effects of the

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conflict on their child(ren) (80% agree); and did not feel hostile towards the other parent (65% agree). By contrast, parents were dissatisfied with the amount of communication with the other parent (75%) and parents were dissatisfied with the quality of communication they have with the other parent (81%). Parents were split in how confident they felt in managing conflict with the other parent (52% agree, 48% disagree). Comparisons by gender showed statistically significant different feelings of hostility towards the other parent in the pre-test, with women more likely to agree that they felt hostile towards the other parent, but comparisons by marital status (ever married v never married) showed no significant differences on the outcome variables in the pre-test.

On the pre-test questionnaire, participants were provided the statement 'The most difficult issue I have to deal with my child(ren)'s other parent is ...'. The responses to this statement (n = 63) provided some key qualitative insights into the types of issues on which they needed information and some information on their perspective prior to attending the course. A thematic content analysis demonstrated that 76% of the responses could be categorised as 'blaming other parent' for current conflicts. Some examples included:

'How he makes every little thing an issue.'

'The other party not controlling the behavior all the time with the child (back talking, not listening). The other party calling me to handle problems she is having with the child.'

'The biggest problem is the other parent not following a visitation contract that was written during a child custody mediation. Agreement was signed by a judge. It is legal and binding.'

'She puts too much toxic nature in our kids' faces.'

Another large category related to statements that reflected poor communication between the parents (33%). Some examples included:

'Communication – there is none between myself and the father not between himself and our children. His choice.'

'She does not communicate with me at all. I have to talk to her mother/his grandmother about everything. I don't get to spend time with my son.'

A smaller, but equally significant category related to issues of violence, safety, and substance abuse (12%). Some examples included:

'Bringing different men in and out of the house in front of my 8 year old daughter.'

'I was in an abusive relationship and I am concerned that my child's father uses her as a way to hold control over me.'

'He is a heavy drinker, pot smoker, and I have tried to help him and his older son quit the pot so they can interact with [child's name], but they think I am crazy for not seeing the light at pot smoking and partying.'

The issues raised by these comments show the diverse individual needs of the programme participants and the significant task that the programme facilitators face in providing relevant, targeted information, and helping to refocus participants on children's perspectives and develop co-parenting skills.

Post Test

Results from the post test (n = 76) demonstrated that programme facilitators were able to reinforce some of the positive attitudes already held by the participants and provide some significant improvements in the areas of expectations and skills for communication and conflict management. It appears that taking the course, reinforces parents to understand the importance of a positive relationship (96% agree). Parents also agree that taking the course provided information (95%) and tools and skills on better conflict management (96%); will result in their children being exposed to less conflict (94%); will improve the amount (90%) and quality of communication with the other parent (94%); reduced feelings of hostility towards the other parent (68%), and improved their confidence in managing conflict with the other parent (91%). Overwhelmingly, parents agreed they would recommend this programme to their friends/family (97%).

While post-test data alone provided some insights, more detailed statistical analyses using t-tests were conducted by comparing similar questions from the pre and post tests. These analyses demonstrated some important impacts of the programme: the amount of communication should improve; the quality of communication should improve; parents feel more confident about managing conflict; and feel less hostile towards the other parent. These results demonstrate that the effects are the result of the programme and not just pre-existing beliefs that either matched or were unaffected by course content. Based on studies of similar programmes and the given likelihood of positive evaluation, these quantitative results show substantial impact.

As with the pre-test, participants also provided some qualitative data. They were asked to report 'the most useful thing you learned in the class' (n = 80). Most frequently reported comments related to 'Communication/talk with other parent' (35%) and 'Learn to focus on child's needs/perspective' (30%). Other issues included, the district court parenting guidelines, focus on 'business' of parenting, and the

importance of using dispute resolution options like mediation. Several interesting quotes from participants included:

- ‘All info was useful, frustrating, but useful.’
- ‘I realised some things I have done wrong.’
- ‘... I’ve learned what needs to be discussed as far as in court.’
- ‘To listen and not argue.’
- ‘How conflict will affect by child and not to include her in “adult” issues.’
- ‘You both have to agree on not being hostile towards one another and communicate for the child’s well being.’

Of all the comments, only three (4%) were negative. Participants were also asked to report on issues on which they would like to have had more information. While comments were few (n = 7), they seemed to cluster around the types of issues that research suggests are likely to lead to high conflict divorce scenarios including domestic violence, mental health issues, very young children, and substance abuse (J Johnston, and V Roseby, *In the name of the child* (The Free Press, 1997)). Some direct quotes were:

- ‘How to parent when other parent is abusive.’
- ‘Domestic violence and dealing with issues of abuse and neglect.’
- ‘Spouse is narcissist and lies constantly making communication next to impossible.’

‘Visitation as it standardly goes for infants.’

Overall, the post-test comments lacked the blaming attitude implicit in the pre-test comments and a refocusing on knowledge and skills necessary to managing the conflicts. From these analyses, both quantitative and qualitative, it is clear that the programme had an immediate positive impact and that there may be some areas on which to build or to create additional programmes.

Involvement of Professionals

A series of questions on the post-test (and subsequent follow ups) asked participants to describe their level of involvement with other professionals commonly associated with relationship dissolution including therapist/counsellors, attorneys, and mediators (private and court-based). The researchers were interested in this because of research relating to the impact of educational programmes at different stages in the relationship dissolution/parenting conflict process. Although participants would likely not be able to explain the stage they were in, it is possible to extrapolate the stage for most based upon the level of involvement of certain key professionals both in and out of the court system. The involvement of additional professionals would also be important in understanding the level of reinforcement of the information and skills provided by the course.

These analyses showed that the majority of participants are currently/recently involved with the legal system through attorneys and court-based mediators, but relatively few are involved with additional, extra-legal services such as mental health professionals or private mediators.

Table 1 – Percentages of participants in post-test involved with professionals (n = 76)

	Currently	Past 6 months	Past 12 months	More than 12 months	Not at all
Attorney	66.7%	13%	1.4%	1.4%	17.4%
Court-based Mediator	45%	8.3%	0	1.7%	45%
Counsellor/Therapist	27.9%	13.1%	4.9%	6.6%	47.5%
Private Mediator	9.3%	9.3%	0	1.9%	79.6%

One striking point was that participants came to the course at a time when they were heavily involved with other professionals, especially attorneys and court-based mediators. While almost one-third were currently working with a mental health professional, although over half have never seen one. Private mediators had the lowest client participation rates (20% ever saw one), but this was comparable with other studies of voluntary mediation in both the USA and UK. Over half (55%) of participants were currently/have recently been involved in court-based mediation (custody and/or family financial).

Results of 6 and 12 Month Follow Up With Participants

The follow up sample suffered from low participation/return rates (18%), but much of this can be explained by normal attrition expected because of the mobility of recently separated or divorced parents. Because of the limited data, 6 month (n = 16) and 12 month (n = 7) questionnaires were combined into one data set (total n = 23) and analyses specific to the follow up were limited to descriptive statistics and an emphasis on an examination of the comments. Respondents to the follow-up questionnaires had

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similar demographic makeup of the pre-post participants (35% 'never married', 65 % 'previously married'; 48% male, 52 % female) and sessions attended were evenly divided (52% Saturday, 48% Thursday nights).

The majority of parents agreed that taking the course had provided them information (74%) and tools and skills (70%) to better manage conflict with the other parent; reduced feelings of hostility towards the other parent (52%) and improved their confidence in managing conflict with the other parent (57%). The majority of parents still agreed they would recommend this programme to their friends/family (74%). Fewer than half the parents agreed that the course resulted in their children being exposed to less conflict (40%) or improved the amount (48%) or quality of communication with the other parent (48%). T-test statistical analyses that compared follow-up results with post test confirmed

that the results were statistically significantly different for these results. The follow up data demonstrated that the initial overwhelmingly positive response diminished over time, but many participants still felt favourable about the benefits of the class, especially in relation to the information and tools/skills provided in the course.

The data on the involvement of professionals with post-test respondents demonstrated that they were at a significantly different stage than attended the course. Based on their reported involvement with professionals, these parents are significantly less involved with the legal system through attorneys and court based mediators than they were when they attended the course, but no significant change was reported in their interaction with extra-legal mental health or helping professionals such as counsellors, therapists, and mediators.

Table 2 – Percentages of participants in follow-up involved with professionals

	Currently	Past 6 months	Past 12 months	More than 12 months	Not at all
Attorney	17.4%	39.1%	13%	8.7%	17.4%
Court-based Mediator	4.3%	39.1%	8.7%	4.3%	39.1%
Counselor/Therapist	13%	17.4%	17.4%	17.4%	47.8%
Private Mediator	4.3%	8.7%	8.7%	4.3%	69.6%

In addition to these quantitative analyses, it was clear from the written comments (n = 14) to the statement 'One thing I would do to improve this programme is ...' that most people were satisfied with the course, since 'no comment' or 'nothing' was the most frequent response. The few negative comments appeared to come from experiences with the legal system or events that had happened after the class.

'Get rid of all the judges and cops and start over.'

'Overhaul the system.'

'... make other spouse attend the class.'

'Nothing could have prepared my family for going to court.'

One particularly venomous comment demonstrated the potential level of frustration that can come from 'losing' in the adversarial system and result in high conflict parenting disputes and the worst kinds of outcomes for children.

'This program is a joke. A serious waste of money and time, thanks for helping me ruin my life! . . . divorce set up is a money racket and a big joke.'

While most of these comments were outside the scope and abilities of an educational programme, other

comments focused on goals that could be achieved through curriculum modification.

' . . . offer it/recommend to people experiencing separation . . . Maybe there needs to be a "parenting through separation." '

'Not have it all about divorced parents. Remember not everyone is married or ever lived with each other.'

The data indicated that although the legal issues may have been resolved, many of the social and emotional issues were likely still being dealt with by these parents with very little ongoing professional support. It also seemed clear that although the growth of parent education and alternative dispute resolution have helped, that some parents and children still experience the negative effects of an adversarial court system and that high conflict divorce issues may persist despite intervention.

Overall, these results point to an important explanation for the change in perceptions about the information in the course, respondents were in a different stage in the divorce process and their experiences may not have matched the information presented in the course. Further interviews and more detailed qualitative analyses could uncover the exact sources of the reframing of the material, persistent problems, or the types of conflicts which may be more resistant to educational interventions than others.

Conclusions

Evaluating this community-based divorce education programme has highlighted the significant impact that relationship dissolution and inter-parental conflict still has on children and their parents, despite nearly 30 years of developing and creating programmes to minimise the impact. Although many policy makers seem to have 'moved on' from the issues of divorce and relationship dissolution, it is clear that every family experiences the impacts anew and courses like this are still vitally important resources to these families.

The programme demonstrated a strong, immediate positive impact around issues of communication, ability to manage conflict with other parent, information, and skill development. An important immediate impact was the ability of the course curriculum and presenters to alter participants' focus from blaming other parent for problems to a belief in their ability to arrive at personal solutions. Although these benefits did diminish over time, it is unclear the role that normative divorce processes, negative experiences related to the legal process (eg unfavourable court decisions, unsuccessful mediation), and research methodology problems (eg selectivity bias and small sample size) played on the measured effective change.

The process also highlighted the magnitude of attempting to create and sustain a programme that effectively addresses the needs and issues of parents in conflict in just 4 hours. It is probably unrealistic to expect that one 4 hour educational programme will be able to undo all the hurt, resentment, and frustration that parents experience during divorce, on-going custody disputes, or the establishment of a co-parenting relationship if they were never married. The fact that there is any significant measureable impact at all is probably the most important result for any programme of this kind. This programme demonstrated that even 6 to 12 months or more after attending the programme that between 55% and 74% of participants could point to either information, skills, or attitudes they gained from the course that improved their and their child(ren)'s situation and nearly 74% would recommend the programme. In addition, given the time frame in which most of these participants enter the course and considering the critical issues that may have already been decided, it may be difficult for parents to either focus on the material or to be able to apply the material in effective ways without additional support. For those that take the course when involved with other professionals, but before critical issues have

been decided, it is possible that the messages reinforce one another and provide support for making positive decisions.

The results point to a need for additional support in the 6 months to a year following most participants' attendance in the class. It seems that because parents' primary professional involvement is through those associated with the legal issues of relationship dissolution/parenting disputes (eg attorneys, court-based mediators), once the legal issues were resolved so did their support system. Most research on divorce, including what is presented in the course, point to divorce as a process which neither begins nor ends when the legal issues are resolved. Most parents are just beginning to work through issues of communication, scheduling, and conflict management with the other parent after court issues are resolved as they adjust to permanent custody schedules. In addition parents are moving to new neighbourhoods and developing new adult relationships, since most remarriages happen within a few years of divorce. These conclusions may point to a need for follow-up courses or more one-on-one attention from other professionals in the period after the legal issues are resolved.

Developing quality programmes in areas not currently served by these courses has become easier because of the growing number of evidence-based programmes and the number of not-for-profit agencies who understand local courts and community needs and already provide educational courses and dispute resolution services to families. Geasler and Blaisure (1999, above) provided a list of recommendations for parent divorce education programmes that included:

'(a) adoption of more active teaching strategies to assist parents in learning co-parenting and communication skills, (b) inclusion of a children's programme, (c) adoption of written guidelines to guide the implementation of programmes and ensure quality control, and (d) documentation of programme effectiveness through various evaluation strategies . . .' (p 168)

Based on research on this programme and others like it (Blaisure 2003; Geasler and Blaisure 1999; Pollet and Lombreglia 2008, above), it is clear that well-designed, evidence-based programmes can provide needed knowledge and skills for families and children undergoing relationship dissolution and provide a service to the courts and related professionals who work with these families.

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