

The Children First Foundation Parenting
Education Program: A Study on the Effectiveness of a
Divorce Parenting Education Program

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science
in the field of Clinical Child and School Psychology

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December, 2013

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s the rate of divorce has consistently stayed at a high level within the United States. Almost 50% of all marriages will end in divorce (Coontz, 2006; Strow & Strow, 2006). This continued high rate of divorce has led to an increase in caseloads within the family court system. As a result, more of the court's time and resources are being used. Courts are unable to handle the influx of cases, meaning families typically have to wait long periods of time before decisions are made about custody or visitation agreements. Therefore, families find themselves stuck in transition of divorce or separation. As a result, families find it difficult to cope with and adjust to the divorce or separation (Deutsch, 2008).

In order to alleviate some of the pressure from the court system, divorce parenting education programs have been created to inform parents about different circumstances experienced during a divorce or separation (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004). Many of these programs aim to ease the transition for both children and adults, as well as decrease the amount of relitigation occurring within the court system. Parenting education programs are quickly becoming mandated by certain states and counties in order for final judgment to pass on a divorce or separation (Deutsch, 2008; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998).

Because courts are now mandating parenting education programs and using resources to provide such programs, it is important to ensure effectiveness of parenting education programs. Fortunately, recent program developers have started to research the effectiveness of specific programs. Additionally, new literature assesses different aspects of parenting programs to determine what pieces are necessary for an effective divorce parenting education

program. Important aspects of parenting education programs to consider include content, method of delivery, and theoretical foundation. Specific content presented in parenting education programs have been found to be more effective on parenting and rate of relitigation. Additionally, certain methods for presenting the content have been found to be more effective in changing parental behaviors following divorce (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998; Kamniski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). With the growing body of literature, courts, hopefully, will be able to determine what divorce parenting education programs are most effective to ensure resources are being spent wisely.

The current study will explore whether a newly revised parenting education program (Children First Parenting Education Program, January 2011 edition) effectively improves parental attitudes, knowledge, and likelihood. Further, the current study will explore whether the Children First Parenting Education Program January 2011 edition has a larger effect on attitudes, knowledge, and likelihood compared to the Children First Parenting Education Program, May 2006 edition. Additionally, the current study will explore whether the newly revised Children First Parenting Education Program, January 2011 edition has a larger effect on the rates of relitigation among parents who attended the program compared to participants who attended the Children First Parenting Education Program, May 2006 edition.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Divorce in America

Prevalence

In the past twenty years the rate of divorce has increased. Currently, in the case of marriages lasting 20 years, one out of every two ends in divorce (Deutsch, 2008; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). According to the National Center for Health Statistics within ten years, about thirty-three percent of first marriages will end in divorce or separation; within fifteen years, forty-three percent of marriages will end in divorce or separation (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Strow & Strow, 2006). In 2002, the Children's Defense reported one in sixty children experience their parents' divorce each year (Deutsch, 2008), meaning over one million children experience divorce each year (Hans & Fine, 2001). With the increase in divorce rates, the number of individuals affected by divorce is rapidly increasing.

Many believe that divorce is somewhat of a new phenomenon brought on by trends within the modern world (i.e. women's rights); however, the idea of divorce and separation has been around for centuries. Since the mid 1800s the rate of divorce has steadily increased (Coontz, 2007; Strow & Strow, 2006). Some attribute the increase in divorce to the idea of modern marital expectations (Coontz, 2007), whereas, others attribute the increase in divorce to the industrial revolution and the women's rights movement. Whatever the case may be, divorce has become increasingly more accepted within American society (Strow & Strow, 2006). However, with that, the process of finalizing a divorce or separation has become more challenging than ever before (Coontz, 2006).

Effects of divorce on the family court system

The increase in divorce has greatly increased caseloads in family courts. As a result, families often have to wait long periods of time before a judge hears their case. Long waits may result in anxiety and conflict within the family system (Deutsch, 2008). As such, mental health professionals have taken on a new role in collaborating with legal systems to help manage the increase in caseloads in the family court system. Mental Health professionals provide services through education, mediation, and intervention to teach those going through divorce how to manage their emotions, reduce conflicts, and negotiate parenting plans (Deutsch, 2008).

An increasing need for mental health professionals is present in the face of negotiating parenting plans. In the past thirty years, there has been a shift from sole custody to joint legal custody in an effort to keep both parents involved in a child's life (Deutsch, 2008; Kelly & Emery, 2003). This shift requires collaboration between both parents of the child involved in the divorce. Collaboration can be difficult for parents of high-conflict. Parents with high-conflict relationships typically use the courts to decide changes in custody agreements (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004; Deutsch, 2008; Grych, 2005). While only about 10% of parents going through divorce are considered high-conflict parents, their constant need for relitigation consumes a large portion of the Court's time and resources (Deutsch, 2008; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004; Kelly & Emery, 2003), which is expensive and keeps those who need immediate legal services from access to necessary court-related services (Kramer and Kowal, 1998).

Parenting Programs

In the 1960s a shift was made in the way professionals generally addressed child problems. Rather than doing individual treatment with the child, professionals started to

develop interventions focused on the parent/parents of the child (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). From this idea, parenting programs came about and evolved into more than just a means of treating children with problematic behavior. Currently, parenting programs have been developed to improve children's cognitive development, anxiety, and physical health. Additionally child welfare services use parenting programs to improve parenting practices for at risk families (Barth et al., 2005; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008).

A common topic for parenting programs is divorce. Many different parenting programs have been developed for parents going through divorce. Divorce parenting programs have been developed because of the increased rate of divorce and relitigation. Divorce cases have placed a large burden on the family court system. Families going through divorce often have to wait long periods of time before judgments are made on their cases. As a result, families typically experience a lot of added stress and anxiety. Increased stress on the family can be harmful for children involved in divorce (Deutsch, 2008).

Often parents remain in conflict during the divorce process, which can be very hard on the children involved in the divorce. In fact, interparental conflict is linked with children's adjustment problems in the face of divorce (Shiflett & Cummings, 1999; Goodman et al., 2004; Grych, 2005). Additionally, parental conflict often results in relitigation. Relitigation often takes a long period of time and creates tension for parents and children involved (Deutsch, 2008); as a result, children going through litigation may experience poor adjustment, low self-esteem, and behavior problems (Camera & Resnick, 1989; Kramer & Kowal, 1998). In order to reduce conflict, the amount of relitigation, and improve child adjustment, divorce parenting programs were created. Many counties and states now require parents to attend divorce parenting programs before their divorce can be finalized (Deutsch, 2008; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998).