

Research Lessons from a Mandated Parent Education Program

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Introduction

In 1993 a pilot program of mandated workshops for separating and divorcing parents was begun in the state of Vermont. For the past decade, parent education has been required in all 14 counties of the state. Approximately 2400 parents participate in the four-hour workshops each year. The “Helping Children Cope with Separation and Divorce” program [Branch & Shelton, 2001] was developed and is presented by the University of Vermont Extension System in collaboration with Vermont Family Court.

The workshop experience has resulted in a variety of observations that have significant implications for the design and interpretation of research on children’s divorce experience. We have learned much about separation and divorce from the approximately 25,000 parents and relatives who have participated in hundreds of sessions presented by more than two dozen talented, creative, and dedicated instructors. Here we will describe the lessons we have learned and their implications for research design and interpretation.

The lessons learned and their implications

1. The mandate is necessary.

Parents report to us that they would not have sought out information about parenting. Many resent being required to take the workshop, missing work and losing pay, or having to arrange child care and transportation. One measure of success is the response to the program by those parents who say they resent having to attend. Comparing their responses after the workshop presentation, more than half report that they are glad they attended. The fact that the most resistant attendees can change their attitudes toward the program is one of the most important indications of the quality of the presentations.

2. Separation and divorce decisions often are made without professional assistance.

Informal inquiries during the program “How many of you have sought professional help in working out the difficulties in your marriage?” yield rates of less than 10 percent. Those who have sought assistance often report the effort was not successful, but they nevertheless approach divorce and co-parenting differently than those who have not sought help. One research implication of their experience is that we need to investigate the factors that keep people from seeking help. What distinguishes the couples who do seek help, and how can we increase the number who do? What are the outcomes of different types of couple or relationship assistance and education?

3. Parents don’t know where to turn for assistance.

In addition to choosing to divorce before seeking professional assistance, parents typically do not seek professional assistance in dealing with the emotional challenges they and their

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children face during the separation and divorce process. Parents in the presentations often report difficulties their children are experiencing and parental concern about them, but complain they do not know where to engage help for their children or themselves. How many of the problems found in research are the consequences not of divorce, but of parental stress and ineffectiveness in dealing with children's emotional responses? What intervention strategies are useful to children and to parents? Many parents report their schools do not offer support groups or services to their children, and some say they would not want their children to participate in them at school. Often those who know they need and want help say they can't locate it or can't afford it.

4. Many parents are surprised there is information that could be helpful to them in their marriages and their parenting.

Perhaps the most common comment we receive from parents is that we should have taught our course before they married or before they had children. This reflects the fact that parenting education is not common in schools in Vermont. There are few requirements for education about relationships before marriage, and there is no education or preparation required for parenting. These are issues that have been addressed for many years by educators and other family professionals, but little progress has been made.

We need long-term studies to assess the effects of relationship and parenting education in secondary schools and of the voluntary prenuptial programs required by some clergy. The collected experience of our instructors is that the separating parents in our programs have not been impacted significantly by educational efforts.

5. There are several types of "divorces".

Our program is mandated for all parents who file actions in Family Court that involve minor children. These include dissolution of marriages, establishment of parentage, and re-litigation of parenting agreements. Establishment of parentage includes separation of parents who have been in long-term relationships but who have never married, as well as parents who have conceived a child but who have never lived together. In Vermont, civil unions between same sex partners are also dissolved in Family Court, and parents in those cases who have children also attend our workshop.

An implication of this observation is that research on "divorce" may not capture the experience of many children whose parents have never married. In the first rural county where we conducted our pilot program, approximately 25 percent of the couples separating would not have been included in the divorce statistics. For FY 2005, the most recent year in Vermont, new cases filed in Family Court included 2948 divorces and 1027 parentage cases. And only a portion of the divorces included minor children, while all of the parentage cases did.

6. Divorce is a process, not an event

Divorce begins in the childhoods of the parents and continues for some as long as they live. The children of separating parents have been raised in the context of a complex family relationship history. That history has shaped their development, shapes the divorce, and shapes the ways each person in the family copes with it. The co-parental relationship after divorce is a continuation of the relationship under new circumstances, not a new relationship. It will continue to evolve for years.

The actual process of divorce varies greatly as well. Times between the decision to separate and actual separation, between separation and filing for divorce, or between filing and final decree, range from hours to years. The simplest Implication of this lesson is that collecting

data at one point in the process is not likely to lead to understanding of the effects of anything.

7. Parents experience different divorces, as do children.

Partners often describe very different experiences and relationships together. They often present very different views of their children and the children's responses to divorce events. Children might be expected to have very different views from their parents, but parents often report their children also have different views from each other. What is "real?" Research paradigms that rely on one parent to provide data on the relationships or the process or the effects of divorce can only be interpreted as based on the perspective of one. Research should incorporate multiple perspectives and multiple informants. For studies to yield useful understanding of the realities of the divorce and the processes that lead to effects on children, multiple informants and perspectives must be captured and analyzed. Each parent experiences a different divorce and each child in the family experiences a different divorce. Only by combining the perspectives of all can we begin to comprehend the family system processes creating the developmental and relational characteristics of the divorce.

8. First divorces are different from second divorces are different from third divorces.

Because our program is mandated for all parents, we regularly encounter litigants who are divorcing for the second or third time. One or both parents may have been through the process before. We find it helpful to ask the participants about prior divorces at the beginning of the program. When there are some who have been through divorce with children before, we ask if they want to do it the same way this time. Their responses are often an emphatic "No!" Their descriptions of mistakes they have made in the past and how they hope the current divorce will be better provide a foundation of validity and a dose of reality for the other participants that increase receptiveness to our presentation. It would be fruitful to investigate the different approaches parents take in second and third divorces. Their practical experiences and attempts to avoid repeating mistakes could usefully inform prevention and intervention programs.

9. Parents can change very rapidly.

All our instructors have stories to tell of parents who change tactics and approaches to the co-parenting relationship dramatically quickly as a result of participating in the program. Some of these changes are reported by parents at the close of the sessions; others are reported later in chance encounters or by court managers who have witnessed the results of parental changes. Examples of such changes include calling a family meeting to discuss problems and initiate new approaches, meeting with the other parent to initiate a more positive and cooperative stance toward parenting agreements and co-parenting, engaging professional services to resolve ongoing conflicts, ending power struggles, and modifying approaches to parent-child contact time. These events dramatize again the fact that divorce is a process and that one-time assessments may fail to capture significant aspects of the process. Such events also point to the receptiveness to influence of some family members when more appropriate paths are presented in an objective manner. They also suggest a qualitative study to investigate the experiences of families that have altered approaches. What are the factors that make families fertile or receptive, and what sorts of interventions are effective? What strategies could be used to improve the probability that individual families will be exposed to such opportunities to shift course?

10. Parents want simple answers and practical suggestions.

Participants in our workshops regularly ask important, practical and straightforward questions, driven by their concern for their children's well-being. While our instructors and

the other participants often can give helpful suggestions, many of the questions cannot be answered on the basis of valid research. Attorneys, the courts, and mental health professionals ask the same questions. Expert and inexpert opinion abounds and is incorporated into family court law and practice. The opinions may be sound, but they often are unsupported by research. Current research does not support, nor does it negate, much of the standard advice given by legal professionals and by mental health professionals. As an example, there is little research on parenting schedules and their effects, though guidelines based on anecdotal evidence and personal experience are common in the lay literature and in court practice. Practical advice incorporates many assumptions about primary caregivers, attachment, temperament, number and frequency of transitions, sibling relationships, gender identification, etc., etc., While much of the advice and recommendations given make good sense, there is little data to back up their application to parenting in divorce.

Legal requirements and practice sometimes restrict judges from requiring parents to engage in activities that are likely to lead to better family coping in the long run. In Vermont for example, at this writing, if either parent is uncooperative, judges must assign custody to one parent. Even when they feel strongly that parents could and should be able to work out co-parenting, their rules prohibit that approach. They must issue an order which will further alienate one parent and lengthen the time it will take for the parents to reach a cooperative stance with each other.

The simple implication of this lesson is the need for more and better-designed research pertinent to the very practical decisions parents and judges must make. What research can support substantively the common practices advocated in the lay and professional literature?

11. Parents often behave in ways that create new and unnecessary problems for children.

Participants in our programs describe behaviors of both their partners and themselves that could not be more effectively designed to make matters worse. What is more, while they usually describe the behavior of the other parent as evil, they see themselves as having only the best of intentions, justifying their behavior as in the best interests of their children. Many parents have invalid understanding of marital and parental responsibilities and of the divorce and co-parenting processes. This, of course, is what our program is designed to counter. The frequency with which instructors encounter harmful assumptions about parental rights, property and support obligations, parent-child relationships, and other issues, makes it clear that educational efforts must be directed to preventing such misunderstanding. Why could not a license to marry be accompanied by information about the legal responsibilities, rights, and obligations that accompany marriage? Would it be helpful to require new parents to construct a parent agreement that extends to expected behavior in case of separation?

12. Program evaluation must be planned in advance and adequately funded.

We believe our program is worthwhile and useful. Post session evaluations from parents strongly support our belief. But does it really do more than help us all feel better? How would we design research to determine whether the investment of time and energy in any intervention makes any positive difference in the separation/divorce experience and subsequent development of children or their parents? Given the lessons we have learned about the processes of divorce, evaluation studies must be sophisticated and well supported to bear useful fruits.

Our attempt to gather long-term follow-up data on children and parents demonstrated the difficulties of evaluation research [Christensen & Shelton, 1999]. The fact that people who separate often move and change their names presents only the first practical difficulty. Trying to locate and recruit previous participants in our workshops led us to appreciate quite

deeply the efforts of those who have conducted longitudinal research on divorcing couples. We wish their studies had included assessment of educational interventions and their effects.

Recommendations for research

Our experience with some 25,000 parents provides strong support for the importance of incorporating developmental, longitudinal and ecological design features into research on divorce processes and their effects on children's development. Our conclusions are consistent with the long-term research of Constance Ahrons [1994] and Mavis Hetherington [2002] and their many colleagues. To inform educational and mental health practice and public policy, research must be sophisticated enough to provide comprehensive understanding of the complex and multifaceted processes family systems experience as they go through the events leading up to and through separation and divorce, as well as those that comprise coping with the aftermath of parental discord and marriage partnership dissolution. While it is true that in science, including social science, understanding is constructed through the accumulation of small bits of understanding gradually coalescing into a big picture, the process is impeded by overdependence on small inadequate studies that are over-interpreted and over-generalized. We know that families, relationships, development, and the human processes that occur over significant amounts of time are complex and highly diverse; that knowledge is often absent from the design of our research.

At this point, furthering our understanding requires research design that:

- Is prospective, longitudinal, and ecological;
- Incorporates multiple informants, both within and without the family;
- Recruits and includes more diverse samples;
- Includes second and third dissolutions;
- Includes non-married parents and their children;
- Assesses children directly;
- Attempts to assess the variety of situations experienced by children;
- Assesses the timing of events in the divorce process and relates those to relationship and developmental measures;
- Acknowledges the complexity of the multiple influences on children's coping.

Specific topics that warrant vigorous research efforts include:

- Parenting schedules and their consequences
- Studies of effectiveness of education and intervention programs, both for parents and for children
- Children's coping with multiple separations and divorces, including those attachments and separations that follow divorce
- Differential responses of children of the same parents, especially research that recognizes that children of the same parents experience different family constellations
- The dynamic transactions between parents over time, and their relation to children's experience and development
- Processes that lead to improvement in parenting skills and co-parental relationships over time
- Parental strategies that help children cope with feelings that often lead to resistance and rejection of parent attempts to improve parent-child relationships
- Changes over time in children's constructions of their parents' divorce
- Studies of the impacts of contextual factors, including
 - * involvement of parents in new intimate relationships
 - care-giving by extended family members
 - changes in family economic and employment status.

Conclusion

Our experience trying to help parents help their children and themselves cope with separation and divorce has taught us there is much yet to understand, much work to do. We need the work to be done, and to be done well. The most powerful and useful understanding of developmental and family systems processes will come from ecologically-oriented, longitudinal studies with valid comparison groups. In time, our research and our interventions must be coupled with each other, and both must reflect the complexity as well as the practical urgency of the challenges facing couples, children, and their societies.

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