

Research Lessons from a Mandated Parent Education Program

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First International Conference on Children and Divorce

- University of East Anglia
- Norwich, UK
- 24 -27 July, 2006

A Collaborative Effort

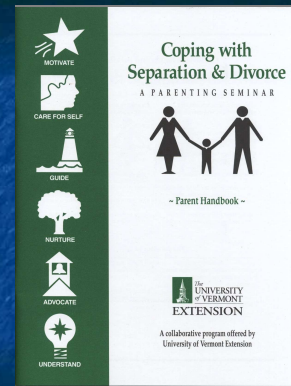
- Vermont Family Court
- UVM Extension
- Human Development and Family Studies, College of Education and Social Services

History

- HDFS Seminar on Parenting through Separation, Divorce and Remarriage
- Judy Brook
 - Extension Faculty Graduate Thesis
- Hon. Shireen Fisher
 - Family Court, Lamoille and Orange Counties

- Families First Curriculum: Atlanta, Georgia
- Pilot Program in Family Court, Orange County, VT
- County by County Adoption, Statewide
- Mandated Participation:
 - Separation
 - Divorce
 - Parentage
 - Re-litigation

- Two Presenters, Female and Male
- Four Hours, One Session or Two
- Evaluation of Session and Presenters
 - 90 % + Agree helpful
- Pre-Assessment:
 - 15 - 20 % Resent being ordered to attend
 - Of those, 50+ % at end agree the presentation was helpful



Since 1993

- Hundreds of Presentations
- More than 25,000 Parents

Lessons

- Consistent with Best Longitudinal Research:
- M. Hetherington, For Better or For Worse
- C. Ahrons, The Good Divorce

Mandate is Necessary

- Most parents won't seek information about helping their children
- Many resent being required to take workshop

Separation and Divorce Decisions are Made Without Professional Assistance

- 5 - 10 % have sought counseling
- Those who have approach separation and divorce differently

Parents Don't Know Where to Turn for Assistance

- Many don't recognize need
- Those who do often don't know about resources
- Some don't have access or can't afford professional help

Many Parents Are Surprised There is Information that Could be Helpful to Them in their Marriages and Parenting

- Parenting Education not common in Vermont schools

There are Several Types of "Divorces"

- Dissolution of Marriage
- Establishment of Parentage
 - Long-term never married
 - Never together

Divorce is a Process, Not an Event

- Life-Span Development Perspective
- Divorce Begins in Childhood
- Timing of Events Varies Widely
- Therefore:
 - One-time Assessments Misleading
 - Longitudinal Data Necessary

Parents Experience Different Divorces

[As Do Children]

- Partners' Perceptions Differ
- Siblings' Perceptions and Experiences Differ
- Therefore:
 - Multiple Informants Necessary

First Divorces are Different From Second and Third Divorces

- Some parents do learn from problems
- Their perspectives are informative

During the Process, Parents May Change Rapidly

- Influence of Information or Program
- Reaction to Specific Event

Parents Want Simple Answers and Practical Suggestions

- Research Often not Adequate
- Expert Opinion and Standard Advice Often not Founded on Empirical Research

Parents' Behavior Often Creates New and Unnecessary Problems for Children

- Invalid Understanding of Marriage and Parenting
- Invalid Understanding of Divorce Processes
- Need Earlier & Better Information

Program Evaluation Must be Planned in Advance and Adequately Funded

Recommendations for Research

- Research Design
- Research Topics

Research Design - 1

- Prospective
- Longitudinal
- Ecological
- Multiple Informants, Within and Without the Family
- More Diverse Samples
- Second and Third Dissolutions
- Non-Married Parents & Their Children

Research Design - 2

- Direct Assessment Of and By Children
- Assess the Variety of Situations Experienced by Children
- Assess the Timing of Events and Relate Those to Relationship and Developmental Measures
- Acknowledge the Complexity of the Multiple Influences on Children's Coping

Research Topics - 1

- Parenting Schedules and Their Consequences
- Effectiveness of Education and Intervention Programs
- Children's Coping with Multiple Separations and Divorces
- Differential Responses of Children of the Same Parents

Research Topics - 2

- Changes in the Dynamic Transactions Between Parents, and Their Relation to Children's Experience and Development
- Processes that Lead to Improvement in Parenting Skills and Co-Parental Relationships Over Time

Research Topics - 3

- Parental Strategies that Help Children Maintain Relationships with Parents
- Changes over Time in Children's Constructions of their Parents' Divorce
- Impacts of Contextual Factors:
 - Parents' New Intimate Relationships
 - Care-giving by Extended Family Members
 - Changes in Family Economic and Employment Status

Coping and Adaptation Are Transactional Processes

- Reflect:
 - Both Parents' Personalities and Skills
 - Children's Characteristics:
 - Sex
 - Temperament
 - Age
 - Skills

And Reflect:

- Context:
 - Third Parties
 - Extended Families
 - Economics

Divorce Has Less Direct Causal Effect Than Often Asserted

Researchers and Family Participants Who Attribute Any Particular Outcome to “Divorce” or “Having Divorced Parents” Are Unlikely to Contribute Much to Understanding the Developmental Process.

Major Causes of Poor Consequences

- Invalid Understanding of Marital and Parental Responsibilities and of the Divorce and Co-Parenting Processes
- Problems in Skills of
 - Communication,
 - Emotional Management,
 - Relationship, and
 - Household Management