

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE: A MIXED-METHODS ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE DIVORCE EDUCATION



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NATIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF EDUCATION FOR DIVORCING OR SEPARATING COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

- Since 2008, education required in almost all states
- Often a prerequisite for a divorce decree
- Evaluation of programs is often customer satisfaction
- More rigorous evaluation strategies are needed

ANOTHER TREND: ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

- Online programming important for reaching busy parents
- Flexibility can help with mandated programming
- Online education has been shown to be effective
- Little evaluation of online divorce education programming

GOAL OF THIS STUDY

- Assess the effectiveness of a 6-hour online parenting education program delivered in a Southwestern state
- 198 divorcing and separating parents with children
 - 90 (45%) male, 108 (55%) female
- 154 (78%) mandated, 44 (22%) voluntary
- Program: Co-Parenting After Romance Ends (CARE) offered by OnlineParentingPrograms.com

CONTENT OF PROGRAM

- Unit 1: When Parenting Partners Separate: Taking Care of You
- Unit 2: When Parenting Partners Separate: Taking Care of the Children
- Unit 3: Managing as a Single Parent (Managing Communication; Managing Conflict)
- Unit 4: Changing Your Partnership: Effective Co-Parenting
- Unit 5: Moving Ahead: Making a Parenting Plan

MULTI-METHOD EVALUATION

Quantitative:

- Four Targeted Perceptions Assessed with Single Item Indicators at both pre-test & post-test
 - **Child Faults**: Seeing child's faults more than good points
Scale: (1) *Never* to (3) *Always*
 - **Child Needs**: Figure out what the child needed or wanted
Scale: (1) *Never* to (3) *Always*
 - **Child Future Well-Being**: How well the child is expected to be doing in 1 year
Scale: (1) *Much worse than they are doing now* to (3) *Much better than they are now*
 - **Participant Future Well-Being**: How well you expect to be doing in 1 year
Scale: (1) *Much worse than they are doing now* to (3) *Much better than they are now*
- Comparison across indicators of race/ethnicity, gender, education level, IPV-status, mandate, and motivation

Qualitative:

- Hopes for/reactions to course as part of Pre- and Post-Course Assessment

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS: PRE- AND POST-COURSE T-TEST COMPARISONS

- Overall, limited significant changes (none for the sample as a whole)
- Growth in how well parents expected to be doing in 1 year, for:
 - Women: $\Delta M = +2.4\%$; $t = 2.36^*$
 - Voluntary: $\Delta M = +4.9\%$; $t = 2.61^*$
- Growth in how well parents expected their child to be doing in 1 year, for:
 - Voluntary: $\Delta M = +5.7\%$; $t = 2.85^{**}$
- Null findings related to other targeted attitudes/anticipated characteristics

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GET OUT OF THIS COURSE? IDENTIFIED THEMES

- **Utilitarian**

- *get a certificate; finalize the divorce; I have to take it, state-mandated*
- Sometimes the only answer, sometimes combined with another category

- **Understand child and parent needs and process**

- *what to expect and what I should know; information to help with the transition*

- **Build skills for parenting and co-parenting**

- To learn to be *productive, healthy, effective, successful, better*, etc. co-parents

- **Improve child outcomes**

- *To make it better for the children, help my children cope*

REACTIONS TO COURSE BY MANDATED STATUS

Voluntary Participants (N=44)

- No one rated the program poor, 8 rated it fair or OK. (cognitive dissonance?)
 - What they liked: Mostly individual comments—communication (2), focused on children (2), online, comprehensive, real-life, videos
- 21 rated the program excellent
 - *Everything, all of it, every single session* (29% of voluntary participants rating 5)
 - *Information and advice*: very detailed and simple to understand; fascinating
 - *Improved parenting/co-parenting behavior*: you learn how to do better as a parent
 - *Process and method*: Videos about people going through the same problems

REACTIONS TO COURSE BY MANDATED STATUS

Mandated Participants (N=154)

- 11 rated the program as poor or fair
 - What they liked: 3 didn't like anything about the program, forcing people wouldn't work even if the material was good, 3 liked that it was online and they could do on their own time, 1 said it was probably good for dumb people or people who don't know anything (but I am educated), and 1 mentioned a specific topic that was helpful
- 48 rated the program as excellent
 - *Process:* Videos, resources, worksheets, real-life situations, helpful advice
 - *Outcomes:* Learned a lot, better co-parenting, taking care of the children, helped me cope
 - *Specific Topics and Overall Reactions:* I am happy I took this course; It gives you lots of amazing tools

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

- Establish cooperative data collection among stakeholders
- Balance an emphasis on consumer satisfaction, attitude change, and behavior change and on outcomes for children, parents, and families
 - Comprehensive assessments of knowledge & attitude change from pre-test to post test
 - Consideration of timing data for participants in online divorce education courses
 - How to assess behavioral change at follow up & how to collect follow-up data
- Support for continued efforts in mixed-method design to explore program utility

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Restore a sense of agency in mandated participants by providing choices and pointing out benefits beyond a certificate
- Tailor courses to participants' needs and situations, especially in the areas of IPV, length of family separation, and appropriateness of co-parenting
 - IPV screening for divorce education (+20% reported some level of IPV)
- Address the costs and benefits of depth v. speed in programming
- Further exploration of the program efficacy of prolonged exposure v. “single-sitting” consumers

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