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# Parent Education Programs: Review of the Literature and Annotated Bibliography

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PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS:  
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE SCHOOL OF LAW

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Court-connected parent education programs are an integral family service component in most of the nation's family courts. These programs are implemented to enable the courts to respond efficiently and effectively to the proliferation of cases involving separation, divorce, and related issues such as child custody and access (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003). Since 2007, parent education classes are mandatory in forty-six states (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). In Maryland, every court with jurisdiction over divorce and child custody matters utilizes some form of parent education.

The findings discussed in this literature review indicate that divorce education is more effective in certain circumstances than in others. Divorce education is less successful in improving communication between parents who already are well into the divorce process, and it is more successful when introduced earlier in the divorce process (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). The literature also indicates that skills-based, interactive divorce education programs are more effective than divorce education programs that simply provide parents with information presented in a didactic format (Bacon and McKenzie 2004).

In addition to highlighting evidence-based best practices, experts offer several suggestions to improve parent education programs (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). These include the adoption of more active teaching strategies to train parents in the utilization of effective co-parenting skills, the inclusion of children's programs, the promulgation of written standards for

program operations, and the implementation of program evaluation protocols to provide more accurate data for ongoing evidence-based program development (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Other suggestions include offering specialized programs for never-married parents, specific ethnic groups, high-conflict parents, violent parents, and chronically litigious parents (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Long-term improvements to parent education programs need to focus more on including interventions to moderate and/or to mediate the effects of divorce on children and to discontinue utilizing those that have no known relationship to improving child adjustment or parent effectiveness (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

As the program evaluations currently available are of limited use, more rigorous evaluations also are necessary to assess parent education program outcomes (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Hughes and Kirby, 2000). In particular, evaluators should focus on the following questions:

- Can studies of programs occur in controlled settings?
- Are the programs being implemented capable of having a positive effect on children and parents?
- Can the programs be delivered in ways that reduce societal costs? (Hughes and Kirby, 2000)

In order for evaluations to truly reflect whether parent education programs are having the desired effect, data must be collected and evidence developed. The data collection must be informed by an understanding of the program processes and must include demonstrable evidence of resulting change. Evaluators must understand the needs of the stakeholders involved in parent education programs in order to design studies that measure relevant outcomes. These

stakeholders include participating parents, program providers, judges, and attorneys (Hughes and Kirby, 2000). Finally, studies must account for the child's point of view (Grych, 2005).

In accordance with the call for more empirically-based assessments to support a better understanding of reliable and sustainable parent education program outcomes, the authors of this report make the following specific recommendations for consideration by the Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts:

- (1) *Implement evidenced-based parent education programs (such as the New Beginnings Program) or other programs that include proven strategies that track participant outcomes.*
- (2) *Provide for a case management protocol to direct parents to parent education programs early in the court process.*
- (3) *Develop and implement specialized programs for high-conflict families.*
- (4) *Implement a case tracking system to differentiate high-conflict families from normatively conflicted families and to direct high-conflict families to specialized intensive parent education programs.*
- (5) *Partner with the University of Maryland School of Social Work to design a long-term follow-up study of parents who have participated in divorce education to measure outcomes such re-litigation rates and sustained child adjustment.*
- (6) *Collaborate with the University of Baltimore School of Law and the University of Maryland School of Social Work to create program standards, to design data collection protocols, and to publish program evaluation results.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **ISSUE SUMMARY**

Over the past thirty years, courts have been called upon to adjudicate problems dealing with families. Particularly, in cases pertaining to separation and divorce, courts frequently are asked to determine issues regarding how to allocate the time children will spend with each parent (Sigal, Sandler, and Wolchik, 2008).

The Maryland Judiciary reported that 48% of its Circuit Court caseload involved family law cases, comprising nearly half of the overall caseload that year (Maryland Judiciary Annual Report, 2006). Of that 48%, 30% of the family law cases handled by the courts involved divorce or annulment proceedings. Moreover, the Maryland Legal Forms Helpline data for 2006 indicates that 52% of the individuals served were seeking help with divorce and separation, and 31% independent of that number were seeking help with custody and visitation cases (Maryland Judiciary Annual Report, 2006-2007).

As the incidences of divorce and separation become increasingly prevalent, children are more likely to suffer the effects of family dissolution (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Brandon, 2006; Bacon and McKenzie, 2004; Grych, 2005; Hughes and Kirby, 2000; Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001; Shifflett and Cummings, 1999). Numerous studies have shown that children experiencing parental divorce and separation manifest increased risks in various areas as compared to children from intact families. These include mental health problems, substance abuse, and social adjustment issues, as well as behavior problems and poor academic performance (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Brandon, 2006; Bacon and McKenzie, 2004; Grych, 2005; Hughes and Kirby, 2000; Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001; Shifflett and Cummings,



1999). Research also has demonstrated that these problems are more prevalent in divorce and separation scenarios where children are drawn into parental conflict, feel threatened by that conflict, blame themselves for the conflict, or when conflict is ongoing and unresolved (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003). Studies of children's distress levels resulting from exposure to hostile, aggressive, poorly resolved, and child-focused inter-parental conflict indicate that these parental disagreements are closely associated with child maladjustment (Grych, 2005). These disagreements often result from a phenomenon known as "triangulation." Triangulation occurs when one parent engages the child as an ally or when both parents believe that the child is the cause of the marital strife (Grych, 2005). In either instance, children suffer emotional distress. Additionally, there is a direct correlation between witnessing parental disagreements characterized by these aggravating factors and a child's maladjustment (Grych, 2005).

High levels of parental conflict during divorce proceedings also are associated with negative consequences for other family members. For example, non-custodial fathers embroiled in high-conflict relationships with custodial mothers experience low levels of satisfaction in their parenting roles. This, in turn, may result in a higher likelihood that the child's father does not sustain meaningful contact with the child after divorce or separation (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003).

In addition to the deleterious effects of divorce on children, the inter-parental conflict often associated with divorce is connected to numerous social and legal issues. Parental strife is identified as a cause of extended divorce litigation, non-payment of child support, decreased visitation by a non-custodial parent, and visitation disputes (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999).

Although divorce and separation are shown to affect the emotional and social well-being of children, these difficulties are not unavoidable. Numerous studies indicate that various factors can have a positive impact on a child's adjustment to divorce and separation, strongly mitigating the risk factors commonly associated with fractured families. These protective factors include preventing children from witnessing or becoming a part of adult arguments and ensuring more frequent contact with the non-custodial parent (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). More frequent contact with the non-residential parent often results in stronger parent-child relationships, thereby improving child adjustment (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Similarly, adherence to visitation schedules is linked to a reduction in the risks associated with high-conflict divorce and separation. Parents are found to be more likely to follow visitation schedules if they are settled soon after divorce or separation (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). A notable mitigating factor for children involved in divorce and separation is parenting behavior that communicates both warmth and discipline (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

In response to the adverse effects of divorce and separation on children and the strain placed on the court system by divorce, separation, and child custody cases, court-connected divorce education programs for divorcing parents have proliferated (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003). Since 2007, parent education classes are mandatory in forty-six states (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). In Maryland, every court with jurisdiction over divorce and child custody utilizes some form of parent education. Maryland Rule 9-204 authorizes the court to order parties to attend parent education programs pursuant to a filing for divorce and separation. The rule sets forth specifics

about program content and length, as well as a statement of purpose: “to minimize disruptive effects of separation and divorce on the lives of children.” (MD Rules, Rule 9-204).

### **PURPOSE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review of parent education programs for separating and divorcing parents pursues six objectives: (1) to classify models of divorce education currently in use and to identify distinctions among them, (2) to set forth the characteristics of effective programs, (3) to distinguish the scope of interventions provided by different models and programs, (4) to identify model programs supported by empirical evidence of programmatic success, (5) to describe divorce education programs currently in use, and (6) to discuss parent education programs that are available for specialized populations.

### **SEARCH STRATEGY**

In order to identify and describe the full range of parent education programs currently in use and to obtain information about their performance, the researchers used a variety of legal and social science online search media:

- Academic Search Premier
- ERIC
- Google Scholar
- Heinonline
- Index to Legal Periodicals
- LexisNexis Academic
- MasterFile Premier

- Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection
- PsychinfoScience
- Citation Index Expanded
- Science Direct-Elsevier
- Social Sciences Citation Index
- Social Services Abstracts
- Sociological Abstracts
- Westlaw

In performing the search of these databases, the researchers used the following keywords:

- child custody
- court-affiliated programs
- court services
- divorce
- divorce education
- mandatory parent education
- parental conflict
- parent education

Articles identified in the keyword-guided search also provided sources for additional exploration by the researchers.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT**

This report contains two components: a review of the literature and an annotated bibliography. The literature review first discusses factors that affect child adjustment and how separation and divorce impact children's growth and development. Next is a discussion of parent education program content, characteristics, and the various models upon which parent education programs are based. Studies of specific parent education programs and the special concerns that need to be addressed by parent education programs are considered. Finally, gaps in the available research are identified with respect to the effectiveness of program structure and content.

The annotated bibliography arranges articles according to the following:

- Issue Summary;
- Factors Affecting Child Adjustment and the Effects of Separation and Divorce on Children;
- Parent Education Programs;
- An Overview of Parent Education Program Outcome Studies;
- Special Concerns Addressed by Parent Education Programs.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **POST-DIVORCE CHILD ADJUSTMENT**

The overall purpose of the majority of parent education programs is to improve children's adjustment to the separation and/or divorce of their parents (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Research has indicated several factors that impact a child's

adjustment post-divorce (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Research also has indicated several factors that often are associated with overall child adjustment post-divorce but are shown to be minimally associated with how well a child adjusts emotionally (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). These studies have informed to a greater or lesser extent the content and structure of parent education programs.

#### **FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH POST-DIVORCE CHILD ADJUSTMENT**

##### *QUANTITY OF TIME SPENT WITH A NON-RESIDENTIAL PARENT*

Research on the effect of the quantity of time a child spends with a non-residential parent post-divorce has demonstrated inconsistent outcomes. Some studies show positive outcomes for children who spend significant amounts of time with non-residential parents, while others find no effect or even negative effects (Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Overall, an ongoing relationship with both parents is predictive of a child's well-being (Brandon, 2006). As a likely consequence, children in joint custody situations adapt to the separation and divorce of their parents more positively than children in sole custody situations (Brandon, 2006).

Evidence indicates, however, that the impact of the quantity of time spent with non-residential parents following divorce is determined by various qualitative factors, including the level of conflict and acrimony involved in the co-parent relationship. Although studies have indicated that frequency of contact with non-residential parents indirectly may influence better child adjustment by improving parent-child relationship quality, they have not identified all of the particular aspects of increased contact that positively affect it (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). Other studies suggest that, more often than not,

children desire to maintain a relationship with a non-custodial parent (usually a father). The preservation of such non-custodial parent relationships is associated with better mental health in children so long as the non-custodial parent's contact is consistent (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005).

Increased contact with a non-residential parent may not be positive in all cases, specifically in situations where a non-residential parent has a strained relationship with the child or where there is high-conflict between the parents (Sigal, Sandler, and Wolchik, 2008). Accordingly, increased contact between non-residential parents and children in high-conflict divorce situations is found to adversely affect child adjustment (Sigal, Sandler, and Wolchik, 2008). Studies of children caught in the middle of high-conflict divorce situations have indicated that, under such circumstances, children having more frequent visitation with non-custodial parents tend to be more aggressive, depressed, and withdrawn, and they are more likely to display somatic symptoms (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). Conversely, research has indicated that increased contact between non-residential parents and children in low-conflict divorce situations produces more positive child adjustment (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Bacon and McKenzie, 2004).

### *QUALITY OF PARENTING*

The qualities associated with positive parenting encompass parents' ability to appropriately discipline and show warmth when interacting with their children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). High-quality custodial parenting post-divorce is consistently linked with positive post-divorce adjustment for children, and there is reliable evidence showing that it is one of the most powerful factors protecting children from the negative effects of divorce

(Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). There is less research on whether the quality of parenting of non-custodial fathers impacts child adjustment, since studies of non-custodial fathers traditionally have focused on frequency of contact and payment of child-support (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Recent studies on the subject have indicated that having a positive relationship with one or the other parent is associated with better child adjustment, while having a close relationship with neither parent is less significant (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Other studies have found that when there is significant acrimony between parents, children benefit from a high-quality relationship with one parent—either mother or father (Bacon and McKenzie 2004). Positive parenting is supported empirically as an antidote to the harmful effects of inter-parental conflict on children. (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). On the other hand, diminished positive parenting practices and elevated negative parenting practices (often associated with inter-parental conflict post-divorce) are found to impact negatively child adjustment (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

#### *CO-PARENTING/COOPERATIVE PARENTING*

Co-parenting is defined as shared parenting with respect to problem-solving and decision-making that implicates the welfare of the children, and it also is the assumption of joint responsibility for caretaking duties (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Co-parenting requires active participation of both parents in the parenting processes. The extent of co-parenting often is measured by whether parents are able to communicate about their children's activities, whether parents jointly undertake activities on behalf of the children, whether parents consult each other on major decisions regarding the children, and whether parents “back each other up” (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). While it is believed widely that increased positive co-



parenting results in better child adjustment to divorce, there is very little empirical evidence indicating the specific aspects of co-parenting that lead to improving a child's adaptation to the family break-up. Some experts point out that the cumulative effect of family dysfunction is a more significant factor in determining child adjustment than is any particular negative consequence of divorce (Sigal et. al., 2008). High levels of inter-parental conflict significantly affect co-parenting capacity and are correlated with lower satisfaction among non-custodial fathers. As a consequence, researchers have found that, in these situations, non-custodial fathers are more likely to have difficulty sustaining relationships with their children post-divorce (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001).

#### *LEVELS OF LEGAL INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT*

From a legal perspective, inter-parental conflict is defined as discord between parents that involves the courts. Legal inter-parental conflict is characterized by protracted litigation, multiple petitions for modifications of child custody and access orders, and enforcement actions for non-compliance with decrees (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Although high levels of legal inter-parental conflict often are associated popularly with child maladjustment, the empirical evidence available indicates that child adjustment post-divorce is only nominally affected by legal inter-parental conflict (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Inter-parental conflict only implicates child adjustment in that it is related to interpersonal conflict between parents, an area that is shown repeatedly to effect a child's post-divorce adjustment (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

### *LEVELS OF ATTITUDINAL INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT*

Attitudinal inter-parental conflict is defined as inter-parental conflict involving hostility toward an ex-spouse and negative responses toward an ex-spouse's parenting (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). High levels of attitudinal inter-parental conflict are associated with child maladjustment post-divorce. While there is very little research in this area, the empirical data that exists indicate that attitudinal inter-parental conflict only nominally impacts child maladjustment (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Studies indicate that attitudinal inter-parental conflict implicates child maladjustment only in that it is related significantly to interpersonal inter-parental conflict, which is shown to affect child outcomes post-divorce (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

### *LEVELS OF INTERPERSONAL INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT*

Interpersonal inter-parental conflict is defined by conflict-ridden behavior between ex-spouses. Interpersonal inter-parental conflict includes verbal disputes, physical violence, and bad-mouthing (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). A large body of studies has indicated that interpersonal inter-parental conflict between divorcing parents negatively affects child adjustment in numerous ways. It precipitates anger in children and adolescents, poor emotional and cognitive functioning, and a risk for internalizing disorders (such as fears, complaints, worries and shyness) and externalizing disorders (such as disobedience, aggression, delinquency, temper tantrums, and over activity) (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver et. al., 2004; Grych, 2005; Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001; Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005; Shifflett and Cummings, 1999; Brandon, 2006). Interpersonal inter-parental conflict also is associated strongly with a deterioration of

positive parenting once a divorce is granted (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver et. al., 2004; Grych, 2005; Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001; Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Specific aspects of interpersonal inter-parental conflict that are identified as harmful to child adjustment include frequent conflict, hostile or intense conflict (especially physically aggressive conflict), and child-related conflict, especially if it results in the child internalizing the blame for being the cause of the conflict (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001). Studies have found that when interpersonal inter-parental conflict is reduced, there is no difference in the quality of mental health between children from divorced families and children from intact families (Shiflett and Cummings, 1999).

## **PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS**

### **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS**

For the most part, parent education programs are two to four hours long (with several notable exceptions), and they either are optional or mandatory for divorcing parents (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; Geasler and Blaisure, 1999; McClure, 2002; Brandon, 2002; McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999). Programs generally focus on teaching parents techniques to reduce inter-parental conflict and to improve overall parenting skills. The programs include the following elements designed to reduce inter-parental conflict:

- Informing parents about the negative impact of conflict on children;
- Showing motivational videotapes about the effects of conflict on children;
- Informing parents about available resources for children of divorce;

- Teaching effective problem-solving and communication skills to parents (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Geasler and Blaisure, 1999).

The following techniques are used to improve parenting skills:

- Facilitating increased contact between the children and the non-custodial parent (when safe);
- Improving the relationship between children and parents;
- Helping parents plan family activities;
- Training parents to develop specific behavior plans for the child (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Geasler and Blaisure, 1999).

Parent education programs generally fall into two categories: those that are skills-based and those that are informational (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). Skills-based programs usually include such elements as role play, experiential exercises, group discussion and question/answer formats, and facilitated interaction among group participants. Informational programs usually convey material to parents didactically via video presentations, handouts, and lectures (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004).

## MODELS OF DIVORCE EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

### *DIVORCE EDUCATION INTERVENTION MODEL*

One leading parent education article offers a multi-tiered divorce education approach that courts can use to determine which level of programming best fits their divorce education needs and goals (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). This model often is cited in the literature concerning post-separation parent education (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004). The model includes three primary tiers of divorce education intervention and a fourth tier intended for families needing more specialized help. The three primary tiers of the model are: Basic Information, Feelings and Skills, and Brief Focused Intervention (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The tiers contain progressively more extensive programmatic tools, culminating in the fourth tier, which is intended for individual families rather than group intervention settings. Courts may choose the levels of intervention that best fit their goals for parent education and that comport with their available resources. The breadth and depth of the model's components enable courts to address a variety of litigant needs. The utility of interventions, however, is impacted by the volume of cases (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

The goal of the Basic Information tier is to provide the following in a short period of time: 1) evidence-based interventions designed to highlight the effects of separation and divorce on children, and 2) straightforward information concerning effective parenting and co-parenting and the court process (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Program instructors use a combination of lectures, videos, and handouts. These instructors are required to possess only a rudimentary skill set that includes an ability to communicate information clearly, elicit questions, engage parents

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<sup>1</sup> This section describes the various models discussed in the literature. It is not meant to evaluate those models in terms of their efficacy.

in a group learning process, and make helpful and practical recommendations to program participants (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

Some courts choose to offer the Basic Information approach because it is inexpensive. It allows large numbers of families to receive important information in low-risk environments at low cost (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The Basic Information tier of intervention is appropriate to address normative conflict levels that characterize most of families undergoing divorce or separation (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003).

Basic Information programming is limited. It provides very little opportunity for interactive discussion among parents and facilitators and among parents and other group members (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Most of the teaching methods are didactic—presenters provide information, but there is little, if any, opportunity for parents to discuss information or practice skills during the class. Parents wishing to improve their parenting, co-parenting, or other skills must pursue alternative sources of assistance (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

The second tier of the Geasler-Blaisure model, the Feelings and Skills approach, is aimed at parents for whom the Basic Information program is insufficient (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Such parents include those lacking effective communication and problem-solving skills and those more likely to turn to legal remedies to resolve issues (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Although these parents often are dependent on the court system for decisions regarding their children, they have limited knowledge of the legal process (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003).

A Feelings and Skills program includes the same information provided by a Basic Information program, but it also enables parents to express feelings and teaches them interpersonal skills to facilitate a less traumatic family separation (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

Participants are taught and practice parenting skills. Training techniques applied in multiple sessions include role-plays of typical co-parenting situations followed by feedback from other group participants (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The goal of this level of intervention is to enable parents to apply the communication and problem-solving skills learned during the program to real-life situations (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

Feelings and Skills program trainers must have a more sophisticated skill set than those who provide the Basic Information training. They must be able to address parent concerns with empathy, create a supportive environment, protect parents from too much self-disclosure in group settings, engage parents in discussion, provide guidance through role-play activities and skills-based practices, and tailor recommendations and referrals to the needs of individual parents. Trainers must know about group dynamics (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Given the higher skill level expected of trainers and the provision of multiple sessions in response to the more complex program context, Feelings and Skills programs are much more expensive to operate than Basic Information programs (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

Successful Feelings and Skills programs teach parents communication and problem-solving skills that allow them to resolve parenting issues on their own and to avoid court intervention (Blaisure and Geasler, 2000). Such programs may result in fewer contested family law cases (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). This level of service, however, is not appropriate for families experiencing significant inter-parental strife. In these cases, a level three Brief Focused Intervention is indicated (Blaisure and Geasler, 2000).

The third tier of programming, Brief Focused Intervention, is aimed at parents who require more serious intervention than is provided by either the Basic Information or Feelings

and Skills programs. The goal of these Brief Focused Intervention programs is to reduce inter-parental acrimony in high-conflict situations (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). High-conflict cases are those characterized by distrust between parents, high levels of anger, the projection of blame onto the ex-partner, refusal to cooperate and communicate, allegations of abuse, sabotage of the ex-partner's parenting, and a willingness to engage in repeated litigation (Elrod, 2001).

The Brief Focused Intervention approach consists of a series of small group meetings over the course of eight to twelve weeks. Parents are required to attend several meetings, share issues relating to divorce, and receive group feedback. Parents also have opportunities to develop skills to improve parenting and communication, and they are encouraged to practice those skills between sessions (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

Because group sessions involve powerful self-disclosure and program participants exhibit a diverse range of problems that require follow-up, Brief Focused Intervention program service providers should possess extensive training and experience (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The level of training required of service providers and the number of sessions involved makes Brief Focused Intervention programs expensive. As a consequence, consideration of the increased program cost must be balanced against the needs of high-conflict families who otherwise may make extensive use of the courts and consume other costly court services (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

In addition to the three primary levels of intervention, the Family Therapy program alternative is available. This method includes individualized therapeutic intervention (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The Family Therapy component utilizes trained family therapists or other qualified individuals (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Family Therapy programs are intended to



serve individual families and are limited to couples who require intensive assistance to develop effective co-parenting relationships (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

### *THEORY OF CHANGE MODEL*

The theory of change model is a parent education intervention that seeks to effect change by utilizing a three-tiered approach to promote: 1) better outcomes for children, 2) better outcomes for parents, and 3) better outcomes for the community at large. Programs based on this model offer components to address each of these three areas. The theory of change model is cited as the basis for the Assisting Children through Transition program (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001).

### *TRANSITIONAL EVENTS MODEL*

The transitional events model of parent education predicates a child's post-divorce adjustment on the extent of the child's environmental stressors and the interpersonal and intrapersonal resources available to him/her (Wolchik, et. al., 1990). The model emphasizes the various stressful changes occurring in a family's social and physical environment, both prior to and after separation. It targets risk factors and highlights preventive factors to improve the long-term adjustment of children to divorce (Wolchik, et. al., 1990; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). The five modifiable factors that are found to significantly affect post-divorce adjustment for children are as follows:

- Quality of a custodial parent's relationship with a child;
- Discipline strategies;
- Negative divorce-related events;
- Contact with a non-custodial parent;

- Contact with and support from non-parent adults (Wolchik, et. al., 1990).

The transitional events model pinpoints these areas of stress as influential in post-divorce adjustment and seeks to minimize their effects. Specific interventions include strategies to advance parent-child relationship quality and effective discipline, as well as the use of self-appraisals and coping mechanisms (Wolchik, et. al., 1990). Primary residential parents are principal candidates for the transitional events model because of their ability to influence many of the contributing stressors and resources for children (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

#### **PREVALENCE OF PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES**

The number of court-affiliated parent education programs has increased significantly since the 1990's (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Such programs are currently utilized in some form or fashion in almost every state (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

- 46 states have parent education programs.
- 27 states require attendance by statute.
- 5 states have county-wide or district mandates.
- 6 states have judicial rules and orders mandating participation.
- 14 states leave program attendance to judicial discretion.
- 2 states provide for optional program attendance (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

Additionally, a nationwide survey conducted state-by-state on court-affiliated parent education programs yields the following results:

- 14 states mandate divorce education for all parents who file for divorce, separation, child custody and/or visitation;
- 13 states have statutes that permit judges, counties, or districts to create their own mandates for parent education programs;
- 1 state permits local courts to establish rules governing parent education programs;
- 1 state specifies mandatory parent education for all parents but has not codified its mandate;
- 4 states have localized areas in which programs are mandatory;
- 6 states require parent education programs by local court rules;
- 5 states have counties or districts that mandate programs;
- 3 states do not have any statewide mandates, but individual judges may require parents to attend parent education programs before granting a divorce;
- 1 state offers a program in conjunction with an outside agency but does not require it;
- 3 states do not require parents to attend programs and do not offer them (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

## **EVALUATIONS OF PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

### **GENERAL EVALUATIONS**

A survey of parent education programs was conducted in Canada to determine best practices. It studied ten parent education programs across the country representing a range of program models (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). Program effectiveness was evaluated using pre-test and post-test surveys for participating parents. Based on the results of pre and post-program evaluations, the authors published the following findings:

1. Parents participating in parent education programs experienced a statistically significant reduction in conflict over time regarding issues such as child access. There were less significant reductions in conflict over issues such as child support and spousal support, especially for those parents who had experienced greater contention about support issues prior to program attendance.
2. Parents participating in parent education programs experienced statistically significant changes in co-parenting behavior, specifically during periods of communication about child-related matters.
3. Parents participating in parent education programs experienced statistically significant reductions in communications that put children in the middle of conflicts.
4. Parents who reported higher levels of conflict entering a program experienced significant increases in satisfaction in the areas of visitation and time-sharing, while the quality of child custody, access, and monetary support interactions were improved equally. Parents who reported having no conflict prior to attending a program actually experienced a small but statistically significant increase in conflict regarding time sharing and financial issues.

A number of evaluations of short-term divorce education programs have indicated that parents found the programs to be useful and are satisfied with program quality. Limited evidence shows that these programs have a positive effect on parents' attitudes (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999; Grych, 2005). Moreover, one-time parenting seminars help parents feel more confident about helping their children adapt to the changes wrought by divorce and separation. Parents who participate in programs report an increased awareness of children's points of view, positive changes in how they interact with their spouses

and children, and a willingness to consider mediation as an alternative to litigation (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999; Grych, 2005).

There is some evidence indicating that short-term programs (such as Children in the Middle) reduce inter-parental conflict (Grych, 2005). A number of studies, however, have found that short-term programs do not minimize re-litigation rates generally (although re-litigation rates are reduced among high-conflict families). Further, they do not seem to impact high-quality parenting or attitudinal conflicts between parents, nor do they affect child adjustment post-divorce (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Grych, 2005; Elrod, 2001).

Long-term programs have shown more promise in terms of promoting high-quality parenting, improving post-divorce outcomes for children, and reducing inter-parental conflict (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Parents who participate in programs that exceed six hours in length tend to exhibit greater gains in reducing negative behaviors (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). Additionally, some studies have connected long-term parent education programs to reductions in attitudinal inter-parental conflict (i.e. hostility towards ex-spouses) among participants who enter programs exhibiting unusually negative attitudes (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

Evidence seems to show that certain program characteristics result in positive outcomes for parents and children. For example, early intervention parent education programs are associated with reductions in re-litigation rates and increases in cooperative parenting behaviors (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). The group facilitator's skill level also is a predictor of improved co-parent relations between ex-spouses (Pollet and Lombreglia). Studies also have found that it is more effective to

cover a small number of topics over a long period of time rather than many topics over a short period of time (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Furthermore, a survey of judges, attorneys, and parent education providers conducted in Ohio has found that they believe the most important indicators of a successful parent education program are the degree to which: the participating family has court involvement after attending the program, the participating parents agree more frequently, the family members are better adjusted, the parents express a positive view of the program, and the professionals (parent educators, mediators, attorneys, and judges) express a positive view of the program (Hughes and Kirby, 2000).

There also is evidence that skills-based programs are more effective than basic information programs (Bacon and McKenzie 2004). Parents participating in skills-based programs tend to be more successful at cooperative parenting and exhibit greater reductions in inter-parental conflict (Bacon and McKenzie 2004). There is, however, evidence that basic informational programs do offer some degree of guidance to participants (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003). Studies show that parents ordered to attend basic information divorce education programs are more likely to access supplementary divorce education (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003). Basic information programs also are associated with increasing participants' self determinative behavior, such as the ability to reduce children's exposure to parental conflict and to reduce the conflict to which their children are exposed (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003).

## EVALUATIONS OF SPECIFIC PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The following are specific parent education programs that are described in the literature surveyed for this review:

### *ASSISTING CHILDREN THROUGH TRANSITION FOR THE CHILDREN*

Assisting Children through Transition for the Children (ACT) is a parent education program operated in the Seventh Judicial District of the New York judicial system (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001). ACT is based on a theory of change model of parent education programming (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001). It is taught in segments lasting from two-and-one-half to three hours. The program provides information on: 1) child development, 2) children's emotional needs, 3) the importance of keeping children out of the middle of arguments between parents, 4) strategies for renegotiating the relationship between parents, 5) effective communication, 6) problem-solving techniques, and 7) anger management (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001). In addition to a didactic session, small group sessions are provided to allow parents the opportunity to practice skills that they learn in the program. The skills component provides practical techniques that research has shown are associated with better outcomes for children of divorce. The requisite skills are conveyed through video vignettes and role play exercises (Pedro-Carroll and Frazee, 2001; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001). ACT also focuses on reducing litigation, helping parents adhere to parenting plans, and increasing visitation with children. Finally, ACT teaches parents about the divorce process and the effect that divorce-related stressors (such as child support) have on parents and children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

A study was conducted of the ACT program offered in Rochester, New York. Parents who participated in the program were contacted for follow-up both six months and one year after participating in the program. The study indicated that parents who took part in the program found the program helpful. Those surveyed stated that they had an increased understanding of their children's divorce-related needs and how to meet them. Parents also stated that they intended to put skills that they learned in the program into practice. Follow-up surveys of ACT showed that participants had a statistically significant decrease in conflict between themselves and their partners. Participants also testified to increases in effective parenting practices, decreases in the need or desire for further divorce litigation, and increases in the healthy adjustment of their children (Pedro-Carroll and Frazee, 2001; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, and Montes, 2001; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

### *ACTIVE PARENTING*

Active Parenting is a program that was not designed specifically for divorcing parents but has been used successfully in this context. Active Parenting is a twelve-hour program that meets six times with the goal of improving parenting and co-parenting skills and teaching parents to work together. It is classified as a level three Brief Focused Intervention program within the Geasler-Blaisure paradigm (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). There is very little available literature regarding the Active Parenting program. According to the Active Parenting Web site, the program, designed by an established psychologist, is based on the theories of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs—two well-known personality theorists. The program material is presented in six two- hour long videos(<http://www.activeparenting.com/parents.htm>).



## *CHILDREN FIRST*

Children First, developed by the Children First Foundation of Bellevue, Illinois, is a three-hour program consisting of two sessions. It is classified as a level one Basic Information program within the Geasler-Blaisure model of parent education programs (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000; Sigal, et. al., 2008). The goals of the program are to encourage divorcing parents to become more sensitive to children's needs during divorce and separation, to improve co-parenting post-divorce, to reduce litigation, to help parents adhere to a parenting plan, and to reduce re-litigation (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Over the course of the two sessions, participants are shown six videotaped vignettes that portray interactions between divorcing parents and their children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008; Kramer and Kowal, 1998). Parents then discuss effective ways of interacting and handling feelings (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The videos and discussion are used to encourage parents to focus on their children's needs during the period surrounding separation and divorce (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

A study was conducted of a two-hour parent education class based on the Children First model, a mandatory program for divorcing parents in Illinois. The study found that, for those parents who had attended the program, the frequency of re-litigation over a six-year period was lower than that of the control group (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Other evaluations of Children First were mixed. One study found that participation in Children First was associated with reported reductions in child involvement in parental conflict (Kramer and Kowal, 1998). A study conducted in Central Illinois indicated that Children First did not generally have an effect on re-litigation levels. The study, however, found that re-litigation rates were lower after program participation among parents entering the program who initially had reported high levels

of conflict (Kramer and Kowal, 1998). Another evaluation indicated that there was no correlation between participating in Children First and lower levels of conflict. Follow-up studies, however, indicated that the program was helpful for high-conflict families (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

### *CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE*

Children in the Middle, first developed in Ohio, is a short-term parent education program that is available in many jurisdictions (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). It is classified as a level two Feelings and Skills program within the Geasler-Blaisure model of parent education programs (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Children in the Middle is a three to four-hour program that targets issues common to separating and divorcing parents and their children. The program centers on videos and the discussion those videos inspire (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000; Grych, 2005). Children in the Middle aims to improve co-parenting, reduce litigation, help parents adhere to parenting plans, and increase visitation between non-custodial parents and their children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

Participants are shown four videotaped vignettes (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The vignettes include settings where children are placed in the middle of arguments between their parents (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Group participants discuss what errors are made by the parents in those vignettes, as well as how the interaction could improve. Parents then practice these interventions (Geasler and Blaisure; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). The program encourages participants to use “I” statements designed to minimize opportunities for conflict. These statements enable participants to articulate what they want rather than make accusatory statements that implicate the other parent’s failings (Grych, 2005).

Parents also are provided with printed material that includes a list of legal services and an outline of the legal and emotional effects of divorce on parents and children (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Grych, 2005).

Studies of the program demonstrated that families who participated in Children in the Middle (as opposed to those who did not) reported less conflict. Additionally, participating parents reported that they had improved their communication with their partners and had reduced the amount of inter-parental conflict to which their children were exposed (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Grych, 2005; Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). There were no significant differences between participants and non-participants in terms of reports of domestic violence (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Grych, 2005).

Another study found that, in a follow-up done six months after participation in the Children in the Middle program, parents who had participated indicated greater improvements than a control group of non-participants in terms of their ability to empathize with their children, their mastery of communication and conflict resolution skills, and their use of skills to protect children from parental conflict (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999). Moreover, a two-year follow-up study of participants found that parents who had taken part in the program re-litigated half as often as parents who had not participated (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

#### *CHILDREN OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE CENTER*

The Children of Separation and Divorce Center (COSD) (now known as the National Family Resiliency Center) seminar is a Maryland-based parent education program that emphasizes the development of co-parenting skills (Frieman, Garon, and Garon, 2000). Parents

are taught skills to help them shield their children from inter-parental disputes and to develop cooperative parenting relationships. They are instructed about pro-active measures to reduce the stress of divorce on children, how to effectively explain divorce in an age-appropriate manner, how to assess the needs of their children, and how to make appropriate parenting choices. Parents also are taught effective communication techniques, anger management, and conflict resolution strategies (Frieman, Garon, and Garon, 2000). The seminar helps parents to create a business-like relationship with each other by providing them with assistance to develop individualized written parenting plans. Parents also receive a take-home manual to use for future reference (Frieman, Garon, and Garon, 2000).

The seminar consists of two three-hour long sessions that occur at weekly intervals. It is taught by a team derived from a pool of trained facilitators that include post-master's degree mental health professionals, lawyers, mediators, and representatives of various community agencies. A panel of adults and children, "graduates" of COSD, discuss personal experiences and relate coping mechanisms that are useful to promote optimal family functioning (Frieman, Garon, and Garon, 2000).

Parents surveyed in a one-year follow-up indicated that:

- They had been successful in keeping their children from their conflicts by agreeing to refrain from bad-mouthing each other and discussing financial matters in front of the children.
- They had learned to separate fractious issues with their ex-spouses from their relationship with their children and had recognized that children need to spend time with both parents.
- They had gained the necessary skills to help children cope with the divorce.

- They felt knowledgeable about the impact of divorce on children, had explained the divorce in an age appropriate manner, and had created healthy relationships with their children.
- They had had made strides in fostering cooperative co-parenting relationships and felt that they could reach agreements about how to deal with their children.
- They were better equipped to deal with disputes with their ex-spouse, and felt that the communications skills they had learned were useful.
- The seminars were helpful in reducing tensions with an ex-spouse and learning better ways of dealing with the children had helped to reduce many of those tensions.
- They felt they were able to help their children adapt academically and socially.
- They reported that the seminars were helpful in enabling them to achieve an out-of-court settlement and preparing them to mediate disputes relating to their children (Frieman, Garon, and Garon, 2000).

### *COOPERATING FOR YOUR KIDS*

Cooperating for Your Kids is a sixteen-hour parent education program occurring two hours per week over the course of eight weeks. The program is classified in the Geasler and Blaisure Divorce Education Intervention model as a level two Feelings and Skills program (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). Topics covered by the program include:

- Understanding children's reactions to divorce and parental conflict;
- Making a commitment to caring for children;
- Protecting children from harm;
- Ensuring children's long-term mental health;

- Keeping children out of the middle of parental conflict;
- Dealing with parental role changes;
- Disengaging and moving constructively into new life choices;
- Learning and building skills for managing emotions such as anger and grief;
- Realigning structures in new family constellations;
- Developing conflict diffusion and resolution skills;
- Negotiating agreements;
- Creating effective co-parenting communication patterns (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

Evaluations of Cooperating for Your Kids in Orange County, Florida, indicated that parents who participated in the program showed significant improvement in their ability to communicate with their child's other parent (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004). Participants also increased the number of agreements they reached with their ex-spouses regarding the allocation of child care and child visitation schedules. Additionally, participating parents reported a reduction in negative comments about the ex-partner made in a child's presence and a reduction in the belief that the child's other parent was trying to eliminate the influence of the parent in the child's life (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

#### *COURT CARE CENTER FOR DIVORCING FAMILIES*

Florida's Ninth Judicial Circuit has developed a multi-level program to address the needs of divorcing parents. The program is administered through the Court Care Center for Divorcing Families (CCCDF). The CCCDF model provides a wide variety of services, one of which is parent education (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

In the CCCDF model, parents are referred to the program at the discretion of a judge based on the following possible considerations (although this list is not exhaustive):

- Whether the parents' involvement in court proceedings appears to be driven by emotional issues;
- Whether the parents seem unwilling or unable to resolve issues that most divorcing couples are capable of resolving on their own;
- Whether the parents put their children in the middle of disputes;
- Whether repeated attempts at alternative dispute resolution have failed (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

Once the court order to seek services is issued, the center conducts an assessment of each parent, assigns the case to a case-worker, determines the level of conflict and other educational needs of the individuals involved, and provides referrals. Individualized assessment allows the CCCDF staff to determine which levels of programming are appropriate and to screen out individuals who are not well-suited to certain interventions (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004). Some parents are referred to crisis counseling. If this is the case, there is a temporary suspension of formal assessment procedures (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004). Parents are referred to one of three levels of programming based on the initial assessment (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004). These levels include basic information, mild to moderate conflict management, and high-conflict intervention. (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

An additional aspect of the CCCDF model is the availability of on-site crisis intervention for parents seeking immediate emotional help (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004). The CCCDF maintains an "emotional emergency room" in the courthouse where parents may either

walk in or be referred by a judge. The crisis counseling consists of six sessions over a period of four consecutive weeks. After these sessions are completed, parents are referred to mental health services in the community. The interventions utilized by the program are designed to mitigate emotional reactivity, to help the client identify resources, and to develop skills to cope with the divorce process (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

The CCCDF program also offers family therapy on a referral basis. Parents who come to the CCCDF in need of family therapy may be referred to local family therapy practitioners (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

### *DADS FOR LIFE*

Dads for Life (DFL) is an eight-week, long-term parent education program for fathers. The program seeks to target three of the areas implicated in child adjustment to divorce, namely, improving the quality and quantity of time that non-custodial fathers spend with their children and decreasing inter-parental conflict levels between fathers and their ex-spouses (Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005). DFL teaches fathers problem-solving and communication skills through the use of video vignettes that highlight productive methods to resolve conflict. Participants also practice using the skills and methods discussed in the video (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004; Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005).

Early evidence indicates that DFL reduces inter-parental conflict. This finding is based on initial parent self-reports and behavioral observations (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

A separate evaluation of DFL was conducted by the developers of the program (Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005). The evaluation was based on a pre-test completed by 214



participants prior to entering the program. Participants then were solicited for three follow-up surveys: immediately after completing the program, four months after completing the program, and one year later. This particular evaluation was unique in that it also gathered evidence from the ex-wives of participants, the children's school teachers, and (when age-appropriate) the children themselves (Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005). The results of the evaluations were mixed. The ex-wives reported improvements in children's adjustment. No beneficial or significant effects were reported by the school teachers surveyed nor by the children involved. The authors theorized that this result was because many of the children were too young to interview and, as a consequence, were not enrolled in school (Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005).

#### *EVERY PERSON INFLUENCES CHILDREN*

Every Person Influences Children (EPIC) is a program that operates nationwide but seems to be in use primarily in New York. The program involves weekly two-hour sessions that are held for between six to eighteen weeks, depending on court requirements and parent requests. During these sessions, small group activities are used to teach parents effective communication skills for relating to each other and their children (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). EPIC is classified as a level three Brief Focused Intervention program within the Geasler-Blaisure model of parent education programs (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000).

There is very little literature available on the EPIC program, and it does not appear that any significant studies evaluate it. A report on EPIC's at-risk parenting program is available at EPIC's Web site (<http://www.epicforchildren.org/research.cfm?id=4860>). One of the authors of this report is EPIC's Vice President for Research and Program Funding. This at-risk parenting

program is designed for parents who may engage in child abuse, neglect, and other adverse child-rearing behaviors. Techniques utilized by the program include group discussion, grounding and stress reduction exercises, and take-home materials that include information about drug addiction, parenting, and academic achievement (Harvey, Wood, and Tomasello, 2008).

A study on EPIC was conducted on a group of 500 parents who had attended the at-risk parenting program between 2003 and 2007. There was no control group involved in the study (Harvey, Wood, and Tomasello, 2008). Parents completed pre-test and post-test questionnaires, the results of which indicated that program participants showed improvements in the areas of positive parenting skills, family cohesion, parent-child relationships, and parental involvement in school (Harvey, Wood, and Tomasello, 2008). The study also indicated that parents who participated showed a reduced risk for family stress (Harvey, Wood, and Tomasello, 2008).

#### *FAMILIES IN TRANSITION*

Families in Transition (FIT) is a six to eight-hour program in which custodial parents and their children attend separate but concurrent sessions. The program, developed in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is classified as a level two Feelings and Skills program within the Geasler-Blaisure model of parent education programs. Parents in the program learn how to understand their children's feelings and how to develop a workable relationship with their ex-spouses through group discussions, assessment activities, problem-solving exercises, and skill development (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). There is very little literature available that provides information about the FIT program, and it does not appear that any significant studies evaluate it.

## *FOCUS ON THE CHILDREN*

Focus on the Children is a sixteen-hour parent education program occurring two hours per week over a span of eight weeks. The program is categorized as a level three Brief Focused Intervention program on the Geasler and Blaisure scale. Focus on the Children is an intensive program aimed at diffusing high-conflict interactions between parents who have long-term involvement with the legal system. The goals of the program are to limit the negative impact of divorce on children, to improve co-parenting skills, to reduce court involvement, and to augment family functioning. Topics covered include:

- Identifying characteristics of positive shared parenting and the obstacles to those characteristics;
- Identifying the impact of conflict on children;
- Learning and practicing effective communication skills;
- Learning and practicing conflict management skills;
- Practicing negotiation techniques;
- Resolving ongoing problems using the skills learned (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

A study was conducted on the Focus on the Children program in Orange County, Florida. The study was based on the results of pre-tests and post-tests completed by parents who had participated in the program. The study did not include a control group. The study found that parents reported improvements in the following areas:

- Their ability to communicate effectively with their ex-partners;
- Their ability to protect their children from parental conflict;

- Their ability to understand the children’s needs and feelings for the other parent;
- Their ability to understand how each parent contributes to disputes (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

Participating parents also reported constructive changes in: (1) the number of agreements made about everyday childcare issues, (2) the number of negative comments made about the other parent, (3) the amount of discussion with ex-spouses regarding scheduling arrangements, (4) the level of interest that the other parent took in the child. Despite the positive gains reported for improved inter-parent relations, there was an increase in the amount of conflict caused by extended family members and friends (Homrich, Glover, and White, 2004).

#### *GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SEPARATING PARENTS*

General Responsibilities for Separating Parents is a two-hour program mandated for all divorcing parents with minor children in Kansas. The program’s stated goal is to help educate parents about the emotional components of divorce and about keeping children out of divorce battles (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). There is no research to demonstrate the efficacy of this program.

#### *HELPING CHILDREN SUCCEED AFTER DIVORCE*

Helping Children Succeed After Divorce is a two-and-a-half hour program mandated for divorcing parents with minor children in Franklin County, Ohio (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). The program’s mission is to inform parents about the effects that divorce and continued conflict have on children and to educate them about what actions they can take to help their children adjust to the changes in the family. The program attempts to prevent long-term problems common to children of divorced parents. Evidence of the efficacy of Helping Children to

Succeed is limited to the results of one parent satisfaction survey of 600 parent participants in the initial Helping Children to Succeed seminar. Of the parents surveyed, 86% report that they would recommend the seminar to others. (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

### *KIDS IN DIVORCE AND SEPARATION*

Kids in Divorce and Separation (k.i.d.s) is a parent education program that focuses on educating parents about the effect of inter-parental conflict and the breakdown of co-parenting on children, as well as on improving the way parents interact with each other. The program seeks to prevent increased conflict in separating and divorcing families by intervening directly in families characterized by acrimony, miscommunications, and other maladaptive behaviors (Shifflett and Cummings, 1999).

A 1999 study of k.i.d.s was done based on pre-tests, post-tests, and a one-month follow-up with participating parents. Participants' responses were compared with a control group of parents who had not participated in the program (Shifflett and Cummings, 1999). The study found that parents who participated in the program demonstrated increased knowledge of the dynamics of conflict behavior and reported a decrease in that behavior over time. In the one-month follow-up, parents who reported an increased awareness of the dynamics of conflict also reported changes in both their own behaviors and those of their spouses. Finally, participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the program and its delivery (Shifflett and Cummings, 1999). While the results of the study were extremely promising, one evaluation of the study cautioned that the conclusions were of limited value due to critical differences between the test group and the control group (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

Other evaluations of k.i.d.s. are primarily positive. Parents' satisfaction surveys consistently demonstrate that, after participating in the program, parents have a better understanding of divorce issues. They also report changes in how they deal with conflict and that those changes are sustained over time (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). k.i.d.s. is cited as a program that aims to improve the quality of parenting post-divorce, one of the signal factors affecting child development (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Specifically, k.i.d.s. teaches parents how to enhance parent-child relations through improved communication, behavior modification, and attitudinal readjustments (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

### *KIDS KOPING*

Kids Koping is a six-week program in Grand Rapids, Michigan, specifically geared toward parents who frequently re-litigate divorce issues. It is classified as a level three Brief Focused Intervention program within the Geasler-Blaisure model of parent education programs (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). The program consists of an initial two-hour orientation focused on content usually conveyed in a basic information level program. The second segment is a four-hour awareness session comprised of programmatic elements related to the feelings and skills level approach. Subsequent sessions are three hours each and include both parents and children. Among the parent-child activities is an evening meal, after which parents and children attend separate group sessions (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). There are no published evaluations of Kids Koping programs.

### *MAKING IT WORK*

Making it Work is a program offered in Montgomery County, Maryland, that is mandated for all divorcing parents with minor children (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

A survey of this program involved a pre-test of participants and a subsequent six-month follow-up survey. In the six-month follow-up, parents indicated that they had improved their own adjustment to divorce, that they had improved parent-child communication skills, and that they recommended mandatory participation for all parents involved in separation and divorce proceedings (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

### *THE NEW BEGINNINGS PROGRAM*

The New Beginnings Program (NBP) is a long-term divorce education program. The conceptual framework of the program is based on a transitional events model of parent education (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). NBP addresses several issues, including the dangers of involving children in the divorce process and the advantages of developing better parenting skills (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). The focus of the program is on improving parent-child relationships and discipline practices and reducing inter-parental conflict (Grych, 2005). The program specifically addresses bad-mouthing behavior between ex-spouses. Participants discuss the situations that motivate them to bad-mouth ex-partners and are encouraged to talk with friends and family about how to refrain from engaging in this destructive enterprise, as well. The program also encourages parents to control their anger when their children are present by creating and using self-statements (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Participants are encouraged to effect change in the following areas:

- Create opportunities for positive family time;
- Engage in one-on-one time with children;
- Monitor and reinforce positive behaviors in children;
- Improve listening skills;
- Develop discipline strategies;
- Improve anger management (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

The NBP format involves eleven group sessions (lasting 1.75 hours each) and two individual sessions (lasting one hour each). The program involves both didactic components (such as lectures and presentations) and experiential components (such as group exercises and role-plays) (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). The skills taught in each session build systematically upon each other. Early sessions teach skills to enhance the mother-child relationship and how to reverse the negative cycle of interactions that frequently occur after divorce. Later sessions focus on shielding children from the negative effects of divorce (particularly inter-parental conflict), developing discipline plans, and maintaining strategies for the skills learned in the program. The two individual sessions help parents to tailor what they have learned in the program to their individual family situations (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

Among several studies concerning NBP, one involved an evaluation of a version of NBP designed for custodial mothers. The program evaluation measured the following variables: maternal warmth, effective discipline, father-child contact, divorce stressors, and non-parent adult support (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). The evaluation indicated that participation in NBP resulted in significantly lower levels of child-reported aggression and



mother-reported behavior problems (as compared to the control group). The study also demonstrated a positive effect on a mother's capacity to: create constructive mother-child relationships, engage in effective discipline, shield children from negative events, and acquiesce to modifications of visitation agreements upon request (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). The program had the strongest effect for those who exhibited diminished parenting capacity at the outset of the program (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Analysis of the data from the study indicated that the improvements in maternal warmth resulting from the program partially mediated change in children's adjustment issues (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

A second study of NBP evaluated a modified version of the program targeting childhood exposure to inter-parental conflict, mother-child relationship quality, effective discipline, and father-child contact. The study was based on self-reports of program participants garnered from pre-tests and post-tests. The results were compared to a control group of non-participant mothers and children (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). The findings were similar to the earlier evaluation mentioned above (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Children whose mothers participated in the program showed significantly lower internalizing and externalizing behavior problems at a six-month follow-up. The same group of mothers used more effective discipline methods, had more positive relationships with their children, and had less negative attitudes toward father-child relationships (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). An analysis of the data from a six-month post-program evaluation indicated that improvement in the mother-child relationship and enhancement of effective discipline accounted for the lower levels of child-related externalizing behavior problems (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

A six-year follow-up study of NBP observed the effects of divorce on children between the ages of fifteen and nineteen whose mothers had participated in the program (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). The study indicated that the children of NBP participants had fewer occurrences of mental health problems and alcohol, marijuana, and drug use. Children who were generally at higher risk for developing mental health problems due to high levels of stress and conflict seemed to benefit the most from NBP (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

Another evaluation of NBP was less positive. One study found that the program did not generally affect the incidence of interpersonal conflict between participating parents (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). It was suggested that this phenomenon was the result of a relative lack of emphasis in the program on conflict resolution (only two sessions of the program were devoted to conflict, whereas, nine sessions were devoted to parenting) (Grych, 2005).

### *ORIENTATION FOR DIVORCING PARENTS*

Orientation for Divorcing Parents (ODP) is a divorce education program consisting of five two-hour sessions. The program uses both didactic and interactive techniques (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999). ODP addresses co-parenting post-divorce, one of the factors impacting upon child adjustment (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Specifically, ODP teaches parents skills oriented toward enhancing more positive communication with ex-spouses (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). It also helps parents adapt to divorce based on the theory that parents function more effectively if they have fewer adjustment issues. Techniques utilized in improving parent adjustment include teaching parents coping mechanisms and helping parents

adjust to the use of parenting plans (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Finally, ODP teaches parents about the divorce process and the effect that divorce-related stressors (such as payment of child support) have on parents and children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

A study of ODP utilized a pre-test, a post-test, a three-month follow-up test, and a control group. Although participants reported changes between the post-test and the three-month follow-up test, there was no significant difference between the participant group and the control group in terms of child outcomes, parental adjustment, communication skills, relationships with ex-spouses, and legal issues (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999).

#### *PARENT EDUCATION AND CUSTODY EFFECTIVENESS*

Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness (P.E.A.C.E.) is an information-based parent education program that teaches parents about the legal process, the emotional impact of divorce on separating adults and their children, and how parents can make the transition easier on their children. The goal of the P.E.A.C.E. program is to improve post-divorce adjustment in children. The program is based on social learning theory and draws upon parenting skills training, which teaches parents about child development (Schepard, 2000; McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999). There are several programs that are substantially similar to P.E.A.C.E. They operate under different names, which include Parents and Children Together and Helping Children Cope (Schepard, 2000). The P.E.A.C.E. program currently is operating in sixty counties in New York (<http://www.courts.state.ny.us/ip/parented/pdf/PublicCertifiedPEP01.pdf>).

P.E.A.C.E. attempts to improve parenting quality by teaching parents skills to communicate effectively with their ex-spouses (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

Additionally, P.E.A.C.E. teaches parents how to adjust to divorce. Techniques utilized to promote parent adjustment include teaching parents adaptive coping mechanisms and helping parents to accept parenting plans (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Finally, P.E.A.C.E. teaches parents about the divorce process and the effect that divorce-related stressors (such as child support) have on parents and children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

An evaluation of the P.E.A.C.E. program was conducted in 2000 by the Hofstra University Department of Psychology (Schepard, 2000). The program evaluated in this particular study was in use in Nassau County, New York, at the time of the study. The study was based on 89 participating parents' responses to a pre-test, a post-test, and a three-month follow-up interview. The evaluation utilized a control group of parents who had not participated yet in P.E.A.C.E. (Schepard, 2000; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). The results indicated that the P.E.A.C.E. program engendered high levels of parent satisfaction. Parents involved in the program reported they were more knowledgeable about the divorce process than they were prior to participating in the program, and they demonstrated more knowledge about the divorce process than parents who had not participated in the program. Additionally, participating parents reported that they had more positive attitudes toward their children, as well as an increased tolerance of their children's behaviors. Finally, participating parents reported less severe problems with parent-child relationships (Sheppard, 2000; Pedro-Carroll and Frazee, 2001; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

A study of the Ohio P.E.A.C.E. program was conducted in 1999. The study evaluated P.E.A.C.E. for its impact upon the parent-child relationship and the nature of the co-parental relationship (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999). Two groups of divorcing parents were used for the study, one of which had participated in P.E.A.C.E., the other of which had not. Participants

and control group parents were chosen because they resided in similar communities in Ohio and had filed for divorce at approximately the same time (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999). Based on the reports of the two groups, the study found that there was little evidence that the P.E.A.C.E. program had any long-term impact on co-parenting relationships. The program, however, appeared to have a positive effect on parent-child relationships (McKenry, Clark, and Stone, 1999).

### *PARENTING APART: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CO-PARENTING*

Parenting Apart is an educational program designed to teach parents about the impact of divorce, separation, and inter-parental conflict on children and to arm parents with strategies to help their children cope with the stress caused by the dissolution of the family (Brandon, 2006). Participants are educated about the potential sources of distress for parents and children that often are associated with divorce (Brandon, 2006). Parents are informed about constructive coping strategies, as well as methods to improve communication (Brandon, 2006). Finally, parents are given information about the dynamics of family restructuring that accompany divorce, alternative dispute resolution techniques, and domestic violence (Brandon, 2006).

A 2006 study evaluated the Tennessee Parenting Apart program. The program was comprised of four hours of didactic presentations and integrated the “Children in the Middle” video as part of the curriculum. The study was based on a pre-test and a post-test completed by participants and also follow-up surveys sent out three to nine months following program participation. This evaluation design did not provide for a control group (Brandon, 2006). Most parents who completed the post-test reported the following:

- The class was worthwhile.

- The class helped them understand how children are affected by divorce.
- The class helped them understand the importance of cooperative parenting and the importance of allowing both parents to have meaningful relationships with their children.
- The class helped them make a stronger effort to work with ex-spouses for the sake of their children.
- The class is one that they would recommend to other separating parents (Brandon, 2006).

Additionally parents completing the follow-up survey cited a decrease in the following behaviors three to nine months following participation in the program:

- Talking to others about an ex-spouse at times when they were angry with the ex-spouse;
- Sending messages through children;
- Insulting an ex-spouse in front of the children;
- Asking children about an ex-spouse;
- Asking children to take sides;
- Arguing in front of the children;
- Complaining to an ex-spouse in front of the children;
- Yelling in front of the children;
- Fighting in front of the children (Brandon, 2006).

Many parents, however, found it difficult to sustain new behaviors long-term, as evidenced by the responses to the follow-up surveys, which were less optimistic than the post-test responses had been (Brandon, 2006).

## *PARENTS BEYOND CONFLICT*

Parents Beyond Conflict is a parent education program for high-conflict families in the Multnomah County Circuit Court of Portland, Oregon. The program is designed for parents who engage in destructive divorce litigation. The goals of the program are to increase parents' empathy toward children involved in divorce, to help parents become aware of how their behavior negatively affects their children, to help parents learn positive behaviors and useful skills, and, ultimately, to help parents resolve their issues outside the courtroom (McIsaac and Finn, 1999). Teaching techniques include group discussions, videos, and skill building exercises (McIsaac and Finn, 1999).

In a study of Parents Beyond Conflict, researchers followed twenty-six parents participating in a Parent's Beyond Conflict program. In initial program evaluations, parents indicated that they found the program very helpful, that they wanted more sessions, and that they wished they could have taken the course earlier in their parenting careers. A two-month follow-up indicated that one-half of the twenty-six initial participants used the concepts they had learned in the program, one-half of the participants returned for mediation, and six of them were engaged in post-divorce litigation (McIsaac and Finn, 1999). Parents Beyond Conflict received some criticism because, while the program addressed the effects of inter-parent conflict on children and the skills needed to reduce conflict, the program did not include activities that focused on parent-child relationship factors, such as parental warmth or limit-setting (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004). Moreover, one scholar noted that the evaluations of Parents Beyond Conflict were flawed in that they did not make use of a control group (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

## *PARENTING FOR DIVORCED FATHERS*

Parenting for Divorced Fathers is a workshop series that targets divorced and separated fathers. Parenting for Divorced Fathers attempts to improve the quality of parenting post-divorce by teaching divorced fathers how to bolster their relationships with their children through better communication. Parenting for Divorced Fathers also focuses on helping divorced fathers to change their attitudes about divorce, to reduce litigation, to adhere to parenting plans, and to increase visitation with their children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008).

The program consists of six sessions of ninety minutes each. The six sessions involve discussion and role-play, and they cover the following topics:

- Divorced fatherhood;
- Enhanced parent-child communications through listening;
- Enhanced parent-child communications through talking;
- Co-parenting;
- Parent-child activities;
- Where do we go from here (Sloan-Devlin, Brown, Beebe, and Parulis, 1992).

Post-program evaluations of Parenting for Divorced Fathers were conducted based on pre-tests and post-tests distributed six weeks after program completion. A control group was utilized, as well (Sloan-Devlin, Brown, Beebe, and Parulis, 1992). These evaluations showed positive results (Sloan-Devlin, Brown, Beebe, and Parulis, 1992). Participants stated that they would recommend the program to other divorced or separated fathers and said that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up series (Sloan-Devlin, Brown, Beebe, and Parulis, 1992). Participants reported improved self-perceptions of parenting ability and increased effectiveness



in talking to and listening to their children (Sloan-Devlin, Brown, Beebe, and Parulis, 1992). There were no significant improvements reported in co-parenting behaviors (Sloan-Devlin, Brown, Beebe, and Parulis, 1992).

### *PARENTING THROUGH CHANGE*

Parenting Through Change (PTC) is a fourteen session group intervention. The intended audience is divorced mothers of boys (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). PTC teaches parenting skills such as non-coercive discipline, positive reinforcement, problem-solving, and monitoring children. It also teaches conflict management and techniques for controlling emotional reactions in the context of separation and divorce (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005). Program interventions include mid-week telephone calls to encourage participants to use the skills that they have learned and individual sessions for those mothers who need them (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

A follow-up study conducted thirty months after participation in PTC indicated that boys whose mothers had participated in the program had fewer behavioral noncompliance issues than boys whose mothers had not participated in the program. Additionally, participation in PTC was linked with a decreased use of coercive discipline and an increased ability to sustain positive parenting practices after the program concluded (Wolchik, Sandler, Winslow, and Smith-Daniels, 2005).

### *START MAKING IT LIVABLE FOR EVERYONE*

Start Making it Livable for Everyone (SMILE) is a two-hour parent education program designed to be presented in a single session. SMILE is utilized by the court system in Michigan (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). It is classified as a level one Basic Information program within the

Geasler-Blaisure model of parent education programs (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). During the course of the program, presenters show a fifty-minute video entitled “Listen to the Children.” The video features children of various ages talking about their experiences and feelings as a result of their parents’ divorce. Experts provide information on minimizing the negative consequences of divorce for children. At the conclusion of the video, program presenters facilitate group discussions among the participating parents regarding the effects of divorce on children (Geasler and Blaisure, 2000). No research findings are available to support the efficacy of SMILE.

### *YOUR CHILDREN FOREVER*

Your Children Forever (YCF) is a basic informational program in Kankakee County, Illinois (McClure, 2002). The program is a two-and-a-half hour, single session class taught by two instructors. The program is comprised of didactic presentations. Instructors lecture, show videotapes, and provide participants with detailed handouts (McClure, 2002). The information provided to participants concerns the effects of divorce on children, strategies for discussing divorce and separation with children, and ways to strengthen parenting skills (McClure, 2002).

A study of YCF that examined litigation rates among participants in the program yielded unexpected results. The author of the study gathered information on 1010 divorce cases filed in Kankakee County between 1995 and 1998. The author noted all court activity in those cases from the filing date until July 31, 2000 (McClure, 2002). The study found that families who participated in YCF were actually more likely to litigate contested divorce issues and more likely to contest post-judgment petitions (McClure, 2002). Families who participated in the program also were more likely to re-litigate a greater number of issues (McClure, 2002). Finally, the

study found that families who participated in the program were no more likely to conclude post-judgment petitions more quickly than families who do not participate (McClure, 2002). The evaluator theorized that these results were due to failures in teaching methods (McClure, 2002).

#### *NON-SPECIFIED PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS*

In addition to the programs listed above, the literature addresses a generic divorce education program in Dakota County, Minnesota (Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001). Parent education in Dakota County has a threefold purpose. The first is to educate parents about the impact of divorce on the family and on the children. The second is to educate parents about methods to prevent parenting time conflicts. The third purpose is to educate parents about dispute resolution options (Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001). The program seeks to improve co-parenting after divorce by teaching parents skills for communicating with ex-spouses (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). The program also teaches parents about the divorce process and the effect that divorce related stressors (such as child support) have on parents and children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, and Braver, 2008). Program participation is required for parents in disputed custody cases, although parents in undisputed custody cases may be required to attend, as well. Additionally, children may be required to attend a separate, child-oriented divorce education program (Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001).

A study of the Dakota County program based on parent satisfaction surveys found that parents valued the program and learned useful parenting and communication skills from their participation. There were also promising findings that connected the program with a lower exposure of children to parental conflict and participating parents having a greater tolerance for

their ex-partner's parenting role. Both of these findings pointed to positive outcomes for children's well-being (Erickson and Ver Steegh, 2001; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

Finally, the literature cited a multi-state survey involving parent education programs in Phoenix, Arizona; Camden, New Jersey; Connecticut; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Grand Rapids, Michigan (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). The survey, conducted in 1999, examined programs with the following characteristics:

- The programs were mandatory;
- The majority of programs were for all divorcing parents (the New Jersey program served high-conflict parents exclusively);
- The programs surveyed were between three-and-a-half and six hours long;
- The programs were didactic in nature, providing information through videos, lectures, and overhead projections (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999).

The multi-state assessment was based on parent responses to an exit survey administered after participation in a parent education program. Willing parents also participated in a subsequent follow-up telephone interview conducted six months after completing the program. The authors of the study were able to utilize a control group for only one of the sites involved in the study (Phoenix, Arizona) (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). The surveys found that the majority of parents were satisfied with their experience (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). Less than half of the parents at each site, however, stated that parent education gave them insights into working cooperatively with the other parent, and most parents were not convinced that they would be able to work cooperatively with their ex-spouse after participating in the program (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). Those parents who felt that the programs were more helpful in

giving them the ability to communicate with an ex-spouse were the ones who participated in parent education earlier in the divorce process (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). These findings indicated that divorce education was less effective once parents were well into the divorce process (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). Additionally, the study found that there was no significant difference in re-litigation patterns between participating and non-participating parents (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999).

More positively, the study found that program participants in Phoenix indicated fewer ongoing disputes over custody and support than the comparison group. Furthermore, parents who participated in the programs reported slightly better child support payment patterns and slightly better patterns of maintaining regular contact between children and non-custodial parents (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

## **SPECIAL CONCERNS FOR PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

### **HIGH-CONFLICT CUSTODY CASES**

High-conflict cases are those that are characterized by distrust between parents, high levels of anger, projection of blame onto the ex-partner, refusal to cooperate and communicate, allegations of abuse, sabotage of the ex-partner's parenting, a willingness to engage in repeated litigation, ambiguous boundaries, and attachment disparity (Elrod, 2001; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Johnston, 2000). There is a normative level of conflict following divorce, but it is usually temporary and often rationally-based (McIntosh and Deacon Wood, 2003). While it is typical for people undergoing a divorce to experience distrust, anger, and a desire for revenge, the average divorcing individual returns to some form of emotional balance within three years (Elrod, 2001; Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005). High-conflict couples experience these

feelings for years or throughout their lives, often entangling children in parental battles. Frequently, high-conflict couples continue to perpetuate their quarrels, despite changes in their own lives (such as remarriage) and the lives of their children. They engage frequently in extended litigation without regard to mounting legal costs (Elrod, 2001; Johnston, 2000).

Only a minority of cases properly are characterized as high-conflict in nature. Approximately one quarter of all parents maintain significant acrimony for indefinite periods (Braver, Griffin, and Cookston, 2005). These high-conflict cases, however, consume a disproportionate amount of the court's resources (Elrod, 2001; Geasler and Blaisure, 2000; Johnston, 2000). It is estimated that, as of 2000, over two million children are trapped in a repetitive cycle of divorce litigation (Johnston, 2000).

High-conflict cases are very different from the average custody case. These families present a continuum of problems that need to be addressed with a number of intervention approaches. The interventions often are costly and are inappropriate for the vast majority of divorcing parents. It is recommended that courts create differentiated case management systems to identify high-conflict cases (i.e. a system where cases are assessed at the outset of court proceedings for levels of complexity and then assigned to appropriate "tracks") (Elrod, 2001). This approach requires courts to implement effective methods to identify or to rule out high-conflict tendencies among the family law litigant population. While the vast majority of divorce cases are appropriate for mediation, this may be inappropriate for high-conflict cases and may cause an unnecessary waste of the court's resources (Elrod, 2001). Once high-conflict couples are identified, the court must either offer or refer the couple to a wide range of services designed to address their needs (Elrod, 2001).

As of 2001, no state had developed a validated mechanism to screen for high-conflict custody cases (Elrod, 2001). Nevertheless, Idaho and Georgia identified several factors characterizing such cases:

- Petitions for temporary custody;
- Protection petitions including child protection and domestic violence;
- Family dysfunction, such as substance abuse;
- Changes in attorneys;
- A child's refusal to visit a parent;
- A parent who is unable to separate a child's needs from his or her own;
- The presence of more than one child in a household;
- The presence of younger children (hence a longer period of potential court involvement);
- Intimate involvement of extended family members;
- Child abuse;
- Trauma;
- Whether either party was opposed to the divorce (Elrod, 2001).

There are very few programs available that target high-conflict families (Elrod, 2001; Johnston 2000). Traditional programming tends to be ineffective for families embroiled in high levels of conflict and, in cases where domestic violence is a factor, such interventions might be dangerous (Johnston, 2000).

An emphasis on safety and constructive parenting behaviors is required for high-conflict families (Elrod, 2001). Interventions designed to address these issues include encouraging parents to create parallel parenting structures governed by an explicit court order, rather than

emphasizing co-parenting—a skill that is usually encouraged in traditional divorce education (Johnston, 2000). Classes also should explain laws regarding the rights of both parents to child custody and access, contempt proceedings, domestic violence protection, child abduction, and the impact of substance abuse and mental illness (Johnston, 2000). Suggested teaching techniques for high-conflict divorce education should include workshops, written materials, videotapes, and interactive support groups (Elrod, 2001). While such programming is appropriate for families who are overly dependent on the legal system to solve their problems or who lack basic problem-solving skills, these programs are not appropriate for situations involving allegations of domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and mental illness. They also may be questionable for parents with personality disorders, as this population is inclined to use the information gained from the program to foster a strategic advantage in litigation (Johnston, 2000).

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Special care is needed to protect parents who are victims of domestic violence (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). There is an ongoing debate as to whether it is safe or productive for victims of domestic violence to attend parent education programs. While victim advocates claim that program participation places victims in danger because of exposure to their aggressive partners, others suggest that it helps to teach them communication skills to diffuse tension (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Some solutions that are explored include: (1) providing a curriculum that emphasizes parallel parenting, (2) including information about the dynamics of abuse and the ways in which abusers manipulate the divorce system, (3) providing a list of community resources and making referrals for more in-depth services, (4) providing heightened on-site security and ensuring confidentiality (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). In addition, it is suggested



that domestic violence advocates join program advisory boards to help develop curriculum guidelines for parent education programs (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

In an effort to address the domestic violence issue in the parent education context, the Parent Education Advisory Board of New York (the group assigned the task of creating standards for New York's court-mandated parent education) has taken steps to address safety concerns for victims of domestic violence (Frazee, 2005). The board has created guidelines to facilitate the appropriate referral of parents to parent education, to promote safety in program administration, and to call attention to how best to impart parent education information when domestic violence is an issue (Frazee, 2005).

Safeguards put in place by the Parent Education Advisory Board of New York to protect victims of domestic violence in parent education programming include the following:

- Allowing for judicial discretion in referring parents to parent education (as opposed to a simple blanket requirement) and the creation of guidelines to help the judge make informed assessments of who not to refer;
- Including intake questions to screen for domestic violence and thereby enable an opt-out provision;
- Conducting classes in a manner that assumes victims of domestic violence will be present and addressing domestic violence issues in the program content;
- Keeping the curriculum child-centered as opposed to focusing on the relationship between parents;
- Requiring former partners to attend sessions on different days or at different locations;

- Requiring programs to have safety plans in place and security personnel present or on-call at all times;
- Keeping class attendance confidential (Frazee, 2005; See also Lutz and Gady, 2004).

### **GAPS IN THE LITERATURE, AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE**

To a great extent, legislative support for divorce education has preceded evidence of its efficacy (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Shifflett and Cummings, 1999). Research on the value of parent education programs is relatively recent, and there are many areas that have yet to be investigated. Furthermore, studies of program effectiveness are largely qualitative in nature--empirical studies are rare (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; Grych, 2005; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood, 2003; Shifflett and Cummings, 1999). The primary tool used to evaluate parent education programs is customer satisfaction surveys (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008; Grych, 2005; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). These studies involve self-reports, which are of questionable reliability and validity, as parents may over-emphasize positive program results (Grych, 2005). Other criticisms of research methods point to the validity of certain outcome measures. In a number of existing program evaluations, a strong indicator of program success is the extent to which re-litigation rates are affected by program attendance (Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008). Scholars argue, however, that this is not a useful way to assess the effectiveness of a program, because many post-divorce families have ongoing significant problems that do not involve the court. Conversely, many families return to court to certify changes to custody or visitation arrangements entered into by prior agreement. Finally, some forms of re-litigation may be beneficial to families (McClure, 2002; Pollet and Lombreglia, 2008).

An additional problem is that many studies do not follow rigorous investigatory protocols, such as the use of control groups and robust sample populations. For instance, the authors of one study have identified two major flaws in their evaluation: the lack of a control group and the exclusion of children from the study sample (Bacon and McKenzie, 2004). Even studies guided by rigorous protocols often are conducted in clinical settings rather than in the court, which is likely to skew the results (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, 2004). Other defects in research designs include the absence of specified program goals, complete program descriptions, randomization of the study sample to the program or comparison conditions, and reliable and valid outcome measures. Even well-designed studies seem to produce very little evidence that certain parent education programs, specifically short-term programs, work (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver, 2004).

Finally, it is important to note that many of the evaluations completed on individual parent education programs are conducted by people who either created these programs or who have a stake in their success. The lack of an independent evaluator may produce biased results and most certainly does not comport with acceptable research protocols.

## **ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **ISSUE SUMMARY**

Administrative Office of the Courts, Department of Family Administration (2006). "Annual Report of the Maryland Circuit Court Family Divisions and Family Services Programs."

This annual report published by the Department of Family Administration is comprised of data compiled by the Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts. The data, collected from the Circuit Courts of Maryland Family Divisions and the Family Services programs, documents the characteristics of the Maryland court system's family law caseload and what is being done in various counties to provide court-connected family services programs.

## **FACTORS IMPLICATING CHILD ADJUSTMENT**

Goodman, M., Bonds, D., Sandler, I. and Braver, S. (2004). "Parent Psycho-educational Programs and Reducing the Negative Effect of Inter-parental Conflict Following Divorce." *Family Court Review*, volume 42, 263-276.

This article discusses the types of conflict that affect the impact of divorce on children. The article discusses the importance of each of the factors in relation to a child's adjustment to divorce. In addition, the article evaluates a number of parent education programs for effectiveness. Programs discussed in the article include Children in the Middle, Children First, and Kids in Divorce and Separation.

Grych, J. (2005). "Inter-parental Conflict as a Risk Factor for Child Maladjustment: Implications for the Development of Prevention Programs." *Family Court Review*, volume 43, 97-106.

This article examines the elements of discord between parents that affect child adjustment most strongly and assesses parent education programs to determine whether they address those specific issues. The author suggests that parenting programs with the most beneficial effect for children are those that take a two-front approach: (1) supporting parenting functions as a protective factor, and (2) teaching effective conflict management to minimize harmful disagreements. Successful programs also focus on helping parents keep the children out of their arguments (de-triangulating the child) and helping parents distinguish their own needs from those that concern the child. The author discusses in detail several programs that meet these standards (including the New Beginnings Program) and articulates criteria for choosing an appropriate program.

## **PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Geasler, M.J and Blaisure, K.R. (2000). "The Divorce Education Intervention Model." *Family and Conciliation Court Review*, volume 38, 501-512.

This theoretical article presents a three-tiered model for parent education programs that court systems can use to determine a level of programming consistent with their litigant population and sustainable given the financial resources available to the court. The three tiers described address three different inter-parental conflict levels and corresponding program interventions targeted to meet the needs of individuals within each category. The tiers include Basic Information, Feelings and Skills, and Brief Focused Intervention. The necessary qualifications for presenters in each tier also are enumerated. The authors present a prototype of what a program in each tier might look like, cite actual programs that represent each tier, and discuss the possible benefits and limitations of each program unit.

Hughes, R. and Kirby, J., (2000). "Strengthening Evaluation Strategies for Divorcing Family Support Services: Perspectives of Parent Educators, Mediators, Attorneys, and Judges." *Family Relations*, volume 49, 53-61.

This article reports on a survey of parent education and mediation providers, attorneys, and judges asking survey respondents to assess the effectiveness of parent education and to enumerate the criteria by which they would evaluate program effectiveness. The survey results are organized according to the following measures: improved parent understanding, better parental coping, fewer arguments, more efficient dispute resolution, less re-litigation, and better adjusted children. The following factors are cited by all three groups as barometers of success: if the participating family has less court involvement after attending the program, if the participating parents agree more frequently, if the family members are better adjusted, and if parents and program staff who participate express a positive view of the program. The survey is unique in that it highlights the perspective of individuals who are in a position to observe the systemic impact of parent education, in addition to its effect on individual families. The criteria used in the survey are useful to assess a program's success and its suitability for implementation.

McIntosh, J. and Deacon-Wood, B., (2003). "Group Interventions for Separated Parents in Entrenched Conflict: An Exploration of Evidence-Based Frameworks." *Journal of Family Studies*, volume 9, 187-200.

This article discusses the types of parent education programs that have met with success and the factors used to determine that success. The factors include the skill level of the facilitator, the number of participants, and the timing of the intervention, among others. The article also discusses four different levels of programming (information, skills-based, treatment-oriented, and therapeutic impasse). Each level of programming is described in terms of how it works, problems for which it is appropriate, and problems for which it is less effective. The article provides an overview of the basic components of parent education programs on various levels and the program elements that are predictive of positive outcomes.

Wolchik, S.A., Westover, S., West, S.G., Sandler, I.N., Martin, A., Lustig, J., and Tien, J. (1990). "Evaluating an Empirically-Based Parent Training Program for Divorced Families." Paper presented at the 1990 American Psychological Association Conference, Boston, MA.

This article describes the Transitional Events Model, a model that is used as a basis for some parent education programs. The model views post-divorce adjustment in children as it is affected by environmental factors that children encounter as a result of their parents' separation. The article discusses five modifiable factors that exist in a child's environment after parents separate: 1) quality of custodial parent-child relationship; 2) discipline strategies; 3) negative divorce related events; 4) contact with the non-custodial parent; and 5) contact and support from non-parental adults. The article tracks eight custodial mothers utilizing various techniques to improve these five environmental factors for their children under the guidance of graduate psychology students. Using a control group to compare results, the mothers participating in the

intervention have improved the quality of mother-child relationships, have decreased negative divorce-related events, and have engaged in more effective discipline tactics.

### EVALUATIONS OF PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Bacon, B. and McKenzie, B. (2004). "Parent Education After Separation/Divorce: Impact of the Level of Parental Conflict on Outcomes." *Family Court Review*, volume 42, 85-97.

This article discusses the results of a survey in which the authors have selected ten programs from across Canada in order to evaluate the effects of parent education programs on participating parents and their children. The survey indicates that parents involved in skills-based programs tend to achieve better results than parents involved in classes offering information only program content. The survey also has found that different types of conflict between parents are interrelated, and that conflict on one front tends to spill over to other areas. This article indicates that overall positive changes result from parent education programs, but in particular they are derived from specific types of programs.

Brandon, D.J. (2006). "Can Four Hours Make a Difference? Evaluation of a Parent Education Program for Divorcing Parents." *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, volume 45, 171-185.

This article discusses the results of an evaluation of the Parenting Apart program. The empirical evidence presented in this article is the result of a three to nine month follow-up with parents participating in the program. The evaluation indicates that Parenting Apart has a positive effect in changing parents' behavior. Based on pre-tests and post-tests completed by participating parents, most parents find the class to be worthwhile. They feel that it helps them to understand how divorce affects children and the importance of cooperative parenting post-divorce. Participants also report that the class helps them to make a stronger effort to work with ex-spouses for the sake of their children. In a three to nine month follow up, participating parents report a reduction in behavior that puts children in the middle of parent arguments or puts children in a position of witnessing parental disagreements. Many parents, however, find it difficult to sustain new behaviors long-term.

Braver, S.L., Griffin, W. and Cookston, J. (2005). "Prevention Programs for Divorced Nonresident Fathers." *Family Court Review*, volume 43, 81-96.

This article focuses on nonresidential fathers as a special needs group within the parent education cohort. The article cites research indicating that nonresidential fathers have educational needs that differ from those of residential mothers, specifically because of their feelings of powerlessness in custody disputes, the role they play in minimizing conflict, and their importance in helping children adjust to divorce. The article analyzes Dad's For Life (DFL), a program specifically designed to educate nonresidential fathers involved in child custody cases.

The authors describe the program sessions, the educational components, and the materials used. They discuss the results of a study done on program participants' families, which demonstrates that the program has provisional success in facilitating adjustment levels of children suffering from problems as a result of divorce. This article articulates the differing needs of a specific and significant population that is likely to use parent education programs and how that group's needs can be met most effectively.

Devlin, A.S., Brown, E.H., Beebe, J. and Parulis, E. (1992). "Parent Education for Divorced Fathers." *Family Relations*, volume 41, 290-296.

This article describes the Parenting for Divorced Fathers Program, a parent education program that focuses on noncustodial fathers. The article discusses how the program works and what topics are emphasized. The article also describes an empirical evaluation based on pre-tests and post-test interviews occurring six weeks after program completion. The results show that participants recommend the program to other divorced or separated fathers, that they report an improved self-perception of their ability to parent, and that they are more effective in talking to and listening to their children.

Erickson, S. and Ver Steegh, N. (2001). "A Minnesota Comparative Family Law Symposium: Mandatory Divorce Education Programs: What Do the Parents Say?" *William Mitchell Law Review*, volume 28, 889-909.

This article focuses on the reaction of parents to parent education programs. It is based on a study of parent education classes offered in Minnesota. The parents surveyed note the useful information they receive from the courses and the program areas that could be improved. The overwhelming majority of parents report that they would recommend the program to others (although several state that they would only recommend it to people in the beginning stages of divorce). The survey gives a perspective of what parents actually take away from parent education programs and how valuable parent education is for their particular circumstances.

Frieman, B., Garon, H., and Garon, R. (2000). "Parenting Seminars for Divorcing Parents: One Year Later." *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, volume 49, 129-143.

This article focuses on the follow-up results of the parenting seminar developed by the Children of Separation and Divorce Center (COSD), (now the National Family Resiliency) in Maryland. COSD has solicited feedback from parents attending the seminar a year after their attendance. The results indicate that the program is extremely successful in the majority of its target areas. This program is already in use in Maryland and has shown success in a number of areas of interest to the court, including preparing parents for mediation and fostering out-of-court settlements.

Harvey, S.J., Wood, G., and Tomasello, N. (2008). "EPIC: Every Person Influences Children: At-Risk Parenting Program Report." Available at <http://www.epicforchildren.org/research.cfm?id=4860>

This report describes a program entitled Every Person Influences Children (EPIC). The program described is geared toward parents considered at risk for child abuse, neglect, and other maladaptive behaviors. The report describes a survey of individuals who have participated in the program. The results of the study show positive outcomes for program participants. Improvements include increased parenting skills, improved family cohesion, better parent-child relationships, increased parental involvement in children's schooling, and a reduction in family stress.

Homrich, A., Glover, M.M., and White, A.B. (2004). "Program Profile: The Court Care Center for Divorcing Families." *Family Court Review*, volume 42, 141-161.

This article describes the multiple services offered for separating families in the Court Care Center for Divorcing Families (CCCDF) located in Orange County, Florida. The center is a multi-tiered enterprise that provides for the various needs of divorcing parents. It offers parent assessments and referrals to a range of interventions, both short-term and in-depth. The CCCDF presents parent education programs on four different levels based on two different program models. The article gives a comprehensive overview of a program that has shown tentative success.

Kramer, L., and Kowal, A. (1998). "Long-Term Follow-Up of a Court-Based Intervention for Divorcing Parents." *Family and Conciliation Court Review*, volume 36, 452-465.

This article is based on the empirical evaluation of the Children First program. The authors have conducted a survey of Children First programs in Illinois based on re-litigation rates of parents who have participated. Results of the evaluation indicate that Children First does not have any effect on post-judgment litigation levels of participating parents.

McClure, T. (2002). "Post-Judgment Conflict and Cooperation Following Court-Connected Parent Education." *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, volume 38, 1-16.

This article describes Your Children Forever, a parent education program that operates in Kankakee County, Illinois. The article discusses the program itself and then addresses the effect of the program on re-litigation rates based on a study of case activity in 1010 divorce cases filed in Kankakee County between 1995 and 1998. The study has found that families who attend the program are actually more likely to resort to a court battle to resolve post-judgment disputes and to contest a greater number of petitions filed prior to trial. Finally, the study has found that families participating in the program are no more likely to conclude post-judgment petitions more quickly than families that do not participate.



McIsaac, H., and Finn, C. (1999). "Parents Beyond Conflict: A Cognitive Restructuring Model for High-Conflict Families in Divorce." *Family and Conciliation Court Review*, volume 37, 74-82.

This article describes the Parents Beyond Conflict program operating in Multnomah County, Oregon. The article details each program session by defining the principles and skills taught to parents. It also discusses the results of a parent satisfaction evaluation, which indicates that participants have found the program very helpful, that they want more sessions, and that they wish they could have taken the classes earlier in their parenting careers. A two-month follow-up has indicated that one-half of the twenty-six initial participants use the concepts they have learned in the program, one-half of the participants return for additional mediation sessions, and six of them engaged in post-divorce litigation.

McKenry, P., Clark, K.A., and Stone, G. (1999). "Evaluation of a Parent Education Program for Divorcing Parents." *Family Relations*, volume 48, 129-137.

This article discusses an empirical study conducted to evaluate the P.E.A.C.E. program in Ohio. The evaluation uses a control group of parents in a different county who have divorced at approximately the same time, but have not participated in P.E.A.C.E. The study has found little evidence that the P.E.A.C.E. program has any long-term impact on co-parenting relationships, nor does it seem to have a positive effect on parent-child relationships.

Pedro-Carroll, J., Nakhnikian, E. and Montes, G. (2001). "Assisting Children Through Transition: Helping Parents Protect Their Children from the Toxic Effects of Ongoing Conflict in the Aftermath of Divorce." *Family Court Review*, volume 39, 377-390.

This article provides a program summary of Assisting Children Through Transition-For the Children (ACT), a widely used parent education model. The authors describe how ACT is designed to address certain parent behaviors that are identified frequently as detrimental to children involved in divorce or separation. The authors explain the specific program components of ACT and describe in detail the two sessions that comprise the program, including the educational methods and tools utilized in each class. The authors assess the results of the program outcomes based on responses to parent questionnaires completed at the end of the program. Participants report that the program has helped them understand the impact that ongoing inter-parental conflict has on children, that they have learned skills to keep children out of such conflict, that the program has made them willing to try new skills and to consider mediation or arbitration to resolve contested issues.

Pedro-Carroll, J. and Frazee, E. (2001). "Program Can Help Protect Children in Break-Ups." *225 New York Law Journal*, volume 225, number 3.

This article examines the results of a survey of an ACT program site located in Rochester, New York. The groups surveyed have completed the ACT program between six months and fifteen months prior to the investigation. The program participants' responses indicate that ACT positively affects both parents and children, decreases negative behavior in areas commonly associated with problems after divorce, and helps parents to learn skills they later retain. The article showcases the evidence-based improvement in the lives of families and children resulting from a large-scale parent education program model.

Pollett, S. and Lombreglia, M. (2008). "A Nationwide Survey of Mandatory Parent Education." *Family Court Review*, volume 46, Number 2, 375-394.

This article reports the research conducted on selected parent education programs. It presents an extensive overview of program typologies, as well as the degree to which they are effective. The article lists thirteen separate divorce education programs currently in use and evaluates them based on their reported effectiveness in the literature.

Schepard, A. (2000). "Evaluating P.E.A.C.E. (Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness)." *New York Law Journal*, volume 223, 91.

This article focuses on an evaluation conducted by Hofstra University on P.E.A.C.E., a parent education program used in New York. The study shows that three months after their participation in the program, the vast majority of parents are extremely satisfied with P.E.A.C.E. Parents demonstrate a greater understanding of the divorce process (including the legal aspects, its effect on children, and the best coping strategies to help children), as well as more positive attitudes about their children, their children's behavior, and parent-child relationships. They also gain an increased tolerance to withstand certain childhood behaviors, and experience fewer and less severe problems in parent-child relationships. P.E.A.C.E. is a nationally recognized parent education program. The P.E.A.C.E. model is the basis for a number of other divorce education programs used throughout the country, including SMILE.

Shifflet, K. and Cummings, M.E. (1999). "A Program for Educating Parents About the Effects of Divorce and Conflict on Children: An Initial Evaluation," *Family Relations*, volume 48, 79.

This article evaluated the results of an empirical study of the Kids in Divorce and Separation program. The evaluation was based on parent satisfaction surveys. Results of this self-report evaluation indicated that the program had a positive effect on parents' knowledge of the behaviors related to inter-parental conflict.

Sigal, A., Sandler, I., Wolchik, S., and Braver, S. (in press). "Parenting Following Divorce, A Critical Resource for Children," *Family Court Review*, volume 48.

This article categorizes parent education programs by program components, methods, and effects. It also presents a comprehensive cross-section of evaluations on each program listed. The authors discuss the effects of divorce on children and assesses whether various parent education program content is informed by parenting constructs that support positive child adjustment outcomes. Included in the article is a table of court-affiliated parent education programs and a corresponding notation of all published papers on each program. The article includes for each program a brief program description, the program goals, the evaluation design, the method for assigning participants to different programs, the outcome measures used to evaluate program effectiveness, and the performance evaluation dates and evaluation outcomes. The authors present their conclusions about the effect of court-connected parent education programs and suggest program modifications based on those conclusions.

Thoennes, N. and Pearson, J. "Parent Education in Domestic Relations Court: A Multisite Assessment." *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, volume 37, 195-216.

This article describes a multi-state assessment of five parent education programs. The empirical data evaluated in this assessment is based on parent exit surveys and a follow-up with parents six months after attending the programs. The results of the assessment reflect the participants' belief that parent education programs are helpful in sensitizing parents to their children's needs. The study also indicates that parents who participate in the study have fewer ongoing issues with child custody and child support. Less than half the parents at each site state that parent education gives them insight into how to work cooperatively with the other parent and many are not convinced that they would be able to work cooperatively with their ex-spouse after participating in the program.

Wolchik, S., Sandler, I., Winslow, E. and Smith-Daniels, V. (2005). "Programs for Promoting Parenting of Residential Parents: Moving From Efficacy to Effectiveness." *Family Court Review*, volume 43, 65-77.

This article discusses the New Beginnings Program, a parent education program that has shown exceptional results in rigorous experimental trials. The authors outline the areas where the program has been successful beyond traditional parent education models and discuss in detail how the program should be modified for court system implementation. The authors discuss the teaching methods and skills utilized by the program and present the results of a six-year follow-up survey that indicates continuing positive results for children whose parents have been involved.

## SPECIAL CONCERNS FOR PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Elrod, L.D. (2001). "Reforming the System to Protect Children in High-Conflict Custody Cases." *William Mitchell Law Review*, volume 28, 495-547.

This article defines high-conflict custody disputes and proposes solutions to deal with these situations by examining the role of various actors and stakeholders in the conflict. The article explicitly identifies the factors that contribute to a high-conflict custody case and differentiates it from ordinary child custody cases. Specifically, the author discusses how the various aspects of the court system and the dynamics of family relationships, domestic violence, and mental illness contribute to the detriment of children and the courts. Various parent education models currently in use offer programming that is effective for high-conflict parents. This programming, though successful, is far more expensive than mainstream divorce education, although the ultimate savings to court systems are significant. The article's importance stems from its focus on providing a functional definition of high-conflict parents, which is useful for screening parent education candidates for more intense and expensive program models.

Frazer, E. (2005). "Sensitizing Parent Education Programs to Domestic Violence Concerns: The Perspective of the New York State Parent Education Advisory Board." *Family Court Review*, volume 43, 124-133.

This article presents a multi-tiered approach to help victims of domestic violence during the period of separation and divorce. It specifies the Parent Education Advisory Board of New York's strategy to address safety concerns for victims of domestic violence. The results of the Board's collaboration yield a mandate to incorporate three program safeguards. The first two safeguards screen out domestic violence victims from the pool of individuals taking the classes. The third safeguard requires that all programs address domestic violence in the program curriculum.

Johnston, J. (2000). "Building Multidisciplinary Professional Partnerships with the Court on Behalf of High-Conflict Divorcing Families and Their Children: Who Needs That Kind of Help." *University of Arkansas Law Review*, volume 22, 453-479.

This article discusses the growing need for specialized parent education programs adapted to the needs of underrepresented groups. These include never-married couples, various ethnic groups, high-conflict parents, families who are overly dependent on the courts, families who are unfamiliar with court procedures, and individuals who lack proper communication and problem-solving skills. The author suggests different skill sets and educational models necessary

to ensure success with these specific populations. She also discusses cases where specialized programs are unnecessary or even dangerous. Since the number of special needs litigants has proliferated, it is productive for the courts to examine what sort of programming is best suited to their requirements. This strategy is particularly relevant for high-conflict families, who tend to use more of the court's resources than other divorcing families.

Lutz, V. and Gady, C. (2004). "Domestic Violence and Parent Education: Necessary Measures and Logistics to Maximize the Safety of Victims of Domestic Violence Attending Parent Education Programs." *Family Court Review*, volume 42, 363-370.

This comprehensive article discusses the issues that surround the presence of domestic violence victims in parent education program. The article underscores the likelihood that victims of domestic violence, as well as aggressors, are among parent education program participants. The authors suggest measures to incorporate into parent education program procedures and into parent education program curricula to ensure the safety of victims.