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Co-Parenting for Successful Kids: Impacts and Implications

Abstract

We examined the impacts of the Co-Parenting for Successful Kids program offered by University of Nebraska Extension. Using a sample of 2,622 parents who participated in the program in 2015, we measured their knowledge change and ability to perform cooperative coparenting behaviors. Results suggest that the program effectively improved participants' coparenting knowledge and ability to use behaviors such as understanding and supporting children in developmentally appropriate ways, enhancing communication skills, and developing parenting plans. In examining group differences, we found that parents of infants and toddlers benefited the most from the program. Suggestions on program development and evaluation are discussed.

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Introduction

Divorce can lead to "disruptions in the parent-child relationship, continuing discord between former spouses, loss of emotional support, economic hardship, and an increase in the number of other negative life events" (Amato, 2000, p. 1282). Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that divorce adversely affects the developmental outcomes of children (Kelly, 2012; Lansford, 2009). A high level of conflict between parents after a divorce is found to significantly relate to higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems among children (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Elam, Sandler, Wolchik, & Tein, 2016). However, parenting relationships characterized as nurturing and warm can buffer the negative effects of divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011) as can high-quality coparenting relationships (Amato et al., 2011).

Evaluation of Programs on Coparenting for Divorcing Parents

To enhance the coparenting relationship of separating and divorcing parents, many states require that at least one parent participate in divorce education before receiving a divorce or custody modification (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998). These programs are widespread in the United States, with Extension educators reporting in 2013 that 46 states had local or state parent education mandates for divorcing parents (Mulroy, Riffe, Brandon, Lo, &

Vaidyanath, 2013). Many of these divorce education programs focus on enhancing and improving communication and cooperation between divorced parents. Historically, these divorce coparenting education programs were commonly evaluated in terms of how satisfied the participants were with the curriculum. More recently, these programs have been evaluated in terms of how they affect participants' coparenting knowledge and behaviors related to cooperation and conflict, increasing positive communication with children, and reducing court relitigation efforts (e.g., Kramer & Kowal, 1998). Findings have revealed that implementing online coparenting education for divorcing parents affects their confidence in communicating positively with the other parent and the child (Bowers, Ogolsky, Hughes, & Kanter, 2014) as well as decreases the report of coparenting conflict and increases the ability to control negative or angry responses (Becher et al., 2015). A recent study also found that factors such as gender and stage within the process of divorce (e.g., separated vs. divorce finalized) serve as moderators of the impact of these divorce education programs (Becher et al., 2015).

Program Overview

The program Co-Parenting for Successful Kids (Co-Parenting) is designed for parents experiencing separation, custody disputes, and divorce and is required by the state of Nebraska. University of Nebraska Extension developed this research-based program, the goal of which is to develop respectful, responsive, and responsible coparenting. Participants are taught to answer children's questions in developmentally appropriate ways and to keep their children safe and out of the middle of potential interpartner conflict. The program strengthens communication skills that can improve parents' interactions with their children and the other parent. The program has been offered to over 15,000 parents caring for over 25,000 children since it started in 1999. In 2012, the Nebraska Supreme Court approved the use of online technologies for the program. Both online and on-site location classes are currently available, each with a fee of \$50. Nebraska Extension contracted with Nebraska Education Television to develop the online class. Participants register through the University of Nebraska Extension Marketplace website. The online class includes video examples and instruction, interactive pages, and chapter reviews. Participants may take the class in one approximately 3-hr setting or break it up into segments to meet individual scheduling needs. A unique aspect of this self-guided online program is that Extension educators provide feedback regarding parents' work and questions as they complete the online curriculum. Participants have 30 days from the time they register to complete the course. Within days after successfully completing the course, participants receive the official Nebraska Certificate of Completion of Parenting Education Course.

Methods

Data and Sample

For the program evaluation study described herein, the sample consisted of participants who took part in the Co-Parenting program online in 2015 ($N = 2,622$). Participants were asked to complete an online survey via Qualtrics at the conclusion of the program. We employed a posttest-only design with retrospective questions. The retrospective posttest is effective for avoiding response-shift effect (Howard, 1980). That is, the participants had the opportunity to learn terms and concepts before being asked about them. All research methods were discussed and reviewed by the institutional review board at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Table 1 shows participants' demographic data. Over half (56.7%) of the participants were mothers. Approximately 7% were Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, most (92.8%) were White, 40 (1.6%) were Black, 29 (1.2%) were American Indian, and 16 (0.6%) were Asian. Over two thirds (69.8%) had a divorce pending and were seeking custody, a

fifth (20%) were never married and were seeking custody, and the remaining parents (9.9%) had a finalized divorce and were seeking custody modification. The youngest child of the participants was, on average, 6.5 years of age. Over a third (35.4%) of the participants had a youngest child who was 3 years old or younger.

Table 1.

Participants' Demographic Characteristics and Marital and Child Custody Statuses ($N = 2,622$)

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	1,106	43.3
Female	1,447	56.7
Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	182	7.2
Not Hispanic or Latino	2,354	92.8
Race		
American Indian or Alaska Native	29	1.2
Asian	16	.6
Black or African American	40	1.6
White	2,337	92.8
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	7	.3
Other	90	3.6
Marital and child custody status		
Never married, seeking custody	422	20.2
Divorce pending, seeking custody	1,455	69.8
Divorce final, seeking custody modification	207	9.9
Child age (youngest)		
3 or younger	897	35.4
4–8	801	31.6
9–12	455	18.0
13 or older	381	15.0

Note. The sum of the frequencies for each variable varies depending on the number of missing responses.

Measures

Change in Knowledge of Cooperative Coparenting Concepts

Knowledge change was assessed through the use of a five-item scale. The items related to the five topics participants had learned about during the program: (a) how children are affected by divorce, (b) how to help a child adjust to divorce in developmentally appropriate ways, (c) how to use "I" messages when communicating with a child or the other parent, (d) how to keep a child out of the middle of interactions with the other parent, and (e) how to develop a child-focused parenting plan. Participants were asked to indicate their levels of understanding of the five topics before the program compared to their levels of understanding after the program, using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*low*) to 4 (*high*). Internal reliability tests were performed to assess the consistency of results across the five items. The Cronbach's alphas—reliability coefficients—were .84 and .88 for before the program and after the program, respectively, both indicating good or excellent internal consistency.

Ability to Perform Cooperative Coparenting Behaviors

This variable was assessed on a seven-item scale. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that they were able to perform cooperative coparenting behaviors using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*completely true*). The items addressed seven behaviors: (a) helping a child adjust to divorce in developmentally appropriate ways, (b) finding the positive aspects in the other parent and telling them to their children, (c) using "I" messages, (d) not criticizing the other parent in front of their children, (e) keeping their children out of the middle in interactions with the other parent, (f) developing and following a detailed, child-focused coparenting plan with the other parent, and (g) not having a child relay messages to the other parent. The Cronbach's alpha was .92.

Results

Program Impact

We found significant changes in participants' knowledge of cooperative coparenting concepts from before the program to after the program. As the data in Table 2 show, significant changes in knowledge occurred for all five topics. The mean score for knowledge of cooperative coparenting increased from 2.65 before the program to 3.67 after the program (effect size = 1.02). On average, participants had a lower level of understanding of each of the cooperative coparenting concepts before the program as compared to after the program. In particular, the largest effect size was found for participants' knowledge about communication using "I" messages (effect size = 1.30).

Table 2.

Knowledge Changes from Before to After the Co-Parenting Program ($N = 2,622$)

Topic	Before <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	After <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Effect size	<i>T</i>
Divorce and child development	2.80 (.93)	3.57 (.79)	.76	−37.65***

Support for child adjustment	2.57 (.87)	3.67 (.63)	1.10	-57.36***
Communication ("I" messages)	2.38 (.99)	3.68 (.62)	1.30	-59.23***
Child-centered parenting	2.92 (.93)	3.74 (.62)	.81	-43.05***
Parenting plan	2.59 (.98)	3.69 (.60)	1.10	-55.01***
Total (scale)	2.65 (.74)	3.67 (.54)	1.02	-64.38***

*** $p < .001$.

Additionally, most participants reported intentions to perform cooperative coparenting behaviors they learned in the program (see Table 3). For example, 94% of the participants agreed mostly or completely that they were able to support their children's adjustment. Only a few participants responded that they would not be able to stop criticizing the other parent in front of their children (3.2%) or asking their children to relay messages to the other parent (4.3%). The mean score for coparenting behaviors ranged from 3.59 to 3.70; the mean score for using child-centered parenting (e.g., keeping their children out of the middle) was highest ($M = 3.70$).

Table 3.

Ability to Perform Cooperative Coparenting Behaviors after the Co-Parenting Program ($N = 2,622$)

Behavior	Not at all true (1)	A little true (2)	Mostly true (3)	Completely true (4)	<i>M (SD)</i>
Support for child adjustment	1.0%	4.9%	24.9%	69.1%	3.62 (.63)
Positive statements about the other parent	1.3%	4.9%	25.2%	63.5%	3.61 (.64)
"I" messages	1.7%	6.1%	23.8%	68.4%	3.59 (.68)
No criticism of the other parent	3.2%	5.8%	17.2%	73.8%	3.62 (.74)
Child-centered parenting	1.9%	4.0%	16.7%	77.4%	3.70 (.64)
Parenting plan	1.8%	5.0%	20.7%	72.5%	3.64 (.66)
No message relays through children	4.3%	5.1%	14.4%	76.3%	3.63 (.77)

Group Differences

Table 4 shows group differences in the rate of knowledge change and the mean score of ability to perform coparenting behaviors. As mentioned earlier, the rate of knowledge change was expressed as a ratio of change in the participants' knowledge to their knowledge before the program:

$$\text{Rate of Knowledge Change (\%)} = \frac{(\text{Knowledge After} - \text{Knowledge Before})}{\text{Knowledge Before}} \times 100$$

In contrast, the mean score of ability to perform coparenting behaviors was the average of the seven item scores for coparenting behaviors, which ranged from 1 to 4:

$$\text{Mean Score of Coparenting Behaviors} = \frac{\text{Sum (Coparenting Behavior 1 to 7)}}{7}$$

Interestingly, the rate of knowledge change for fathers ($D = 55.82\%$) was significantly higher than that for mothers ($D = 45.81\%$). Black participants ($D = 68.29\%$) and Hispanic participants ($D = 69.59\%$) were found to have higher rates of knowledge change than White participants ($D = 48.56\%$) and others ($D = 47.24\%$). Results show that never-married parents ($D = 54.41\%$) had a significantly higher rate of knowledge change than parents with finalized divorces ($D = 44.24\%$). We also found that parents with infants or toddlers (age 3 or younger) had the highest rate of knowledge change ($D = 55.25$). Regarding ability to perform coparenting behaviors, mothers ($M = 3.66$) reported higher scores than fathers ($M = 3.56$). There was no significant difference in race/ethnicity groups. Never-married parents ($M = 3.68$) were found to have higher scores regarding the ability to perform coparenting behaviors than parents with finalized divorces ($M = 3.51$). Our findings also indicate that parents with infants or toddlers ($M = 3.65$) had higher scores than parents with a focal child 13 years old or older ($M = 3.56$). In sum, the program improved knowledge more for fathers, Hispanics and Blacks, never-married parents, and those with infants or toddlers than for mothers, non-Hispanic Whites, divorced parents, and those with adolescents. Mothers, never-married parents, and parents with infants or toddlers reported having higher levels of ability to perform coparenting behaviors than their counterparts.

Table 4.

Cooperative Coparenting Knowledge and Behavior Changes by Group ($N = 2,622$)

Characteristic	Knowledge		Behavior	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>T/F</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>T/F</i>
Gender				
Male	55.82 (57.02)	4.55***	3.56 (.59)	-4.43***
Female	45.81 (49.57)		3.66 (.52)	
Race/ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic White	48.56 (50.90)	8.97***	3.61 (.55)	.09
Non-Hispanic Black	68.29 (72.25)		3.62 (.51)	
Hispanic	69.59 (67.25)		3.62 (.61)	
Other	47.24 (45.83)		3.64 (.59)	
Marital status				

Never married, custody seeking	54.51 (51.33)	2.56+	3.68 (.47)	6.56**
Divorce pending, custody seeking	51.07 (52.23)		3.62 (.54)	
Divorce final, custody modification	44.24 (52.83)		3.51 (.63)	
Child age				
3 or younger	55.25 (55.99)	6.55***	3.65 (.51)	2.96*
4–8	50.68 (53.76)		3.62 (.56)	
9–12	46.69 (49.27)		3.58 (.57)	
13 or older	41.54 (46.18)		3.56 (.60)	

+ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

By using an online survey data set with 2,622 participants, we examined the impact of the Co-Parenting program for divorcing or separating parents. The overall findings suggest that the participants improved their knowledge of cooperative coparenting and reported being able to use cooperative coparenting behaviors after participating in the program. In examining group differences, we found that parents of infants and toddlers benefited the most from this program in terms of knowledge gain and ability to perform cooperative coparenting behaviors. Notable findings were the differences in perceived knowledge attained relative to gender, race/ethnicity, and marital status. Qualitative research could be helpful in obtaining a better understanding of the topics and skills that particular groups of participants find useful. Extension professionals developing program content for divorcing and separating parents should consider ways to tailor the program based on the needs of the participants who may benefit from receiving different information. For example, parents of teenagers may benefit from receiving different program information than that provided to parents of infants and toddlers. Also, the findings may suggest the usefulness of a culturally sensitive approach, such as developing a curriculum tailored for Hispanic parents beyond merely a translated version of a program. There may be communication techniques or additional cooperative coparenting behaviors to consider for Hispanic families. Further trainings for program educators should advance their awareness of and sensitivity toward these group differences.

Despite these findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the participants' changes in knowledge after participating in the program were measured by retrospective questions. Second, on-site location participants were excluded from the study. Third, the study used immediate outcomes (e.g., knowledge and anticipated behaviors) only. Extended, long-term, or child developmental outcomes were not measured. Fourth, participants' economic statuses, their children's characteristics (e.g., gender, special needs), and other important factors were not considered because such data were not collected. Below is a list of our suggestions for further research:

- A pretest/posttest experimental design with a control (or comparison) group would help maximize internal validity and infer causality.
- The program is designed for the successful development of children; therefore, extended and long-term outcomes (e.g., children's behavioral or socioemotional development as well as parental stress and mastery) should be studied.

- Assessing more predictors (e.g., participants' socioeconomic statuses, neighborhoods, residential information, coparenting styles, resources and supports, and children's characteristics) would enable program developers to create more individualized and tailored programs.
- A follow-up study (e.g., focus group or phone interview) would provide more in-depth understanding of participants' thoughts about their parenting, communication conflicts, child outcomes, and ideas for further development of the program as well as an understanding of whether the parents implemented the cooperative coparenting strategies they learned.

Conclusion

We conducted evaluative research for the purposes of examining the impacts of Co-Parenting for Successful Kids and continuing to improve divorce education and the evaluation thereof. Our study lends additional support regarding the effectiveness of such programs for particular groups of divorcing families and provides key recommendations for using more rigorous research methods for evaluating these programs. Our findings can be a basis for future trainings administered by Extension educators.

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