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Buffering Negative Impacts of Divorce on Children: Evaluating Impact of Divorce Education

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Abstract

Following the call for more stringent evaluation methodology and recently documented national Extension presence in the field of divorce education for parents and children, the study reported here describes a local multi-level evaluation to capture program impact of a stakeholder-accepted divorce education program. Using a post-then-pre retrospective scale and validated measures of inter-parental conflict and child adjustment, participants showed significant gains in key co-parenting and community resources knowledge and significant decreases in inter-parental conflict. Selected components of the evaluation design are applicable to Extension faculty working in divorce education programs.

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Introduction

The historical mission of USDA Extension has been to bring research-based knowledge to individuals, families, and communities through non-credit community educational programs and materials. It has been noted that this goal is consistent with the emergence of "evidence based" practice (EBP) and the rigorous evaluative research required to test interventions for effectiveness and achievement of expected outcomes (Dunifon, Duttweiler, Pillemer, Tobias, & Trochim, 2004; Hill & Parker, 2005). Increasingly, funders are requiring that programs delivered with public funding have proven effective with outcomes documented through research. In addition, Extension faces increased competition for funding and a need to maintain reputation as a source of research-based information consistent with current standards.

A meta-analysis of evaluation studies published in *JOE* found that although Extension usually documents program outcomes, higher-level evidence of impact is limited in Extension evaluation

research. Of 302 articles examined, 88.5% of the articles documented evidence above the level of participation, but only 5.6% documented "true" long-term impact as measured by Bennett's Hierarchy and the UWEX Logic Model (Workman & Scheer, 2012). According to scholars who argue that evidence-based programming increases 1) chances of program effectiveness; 2) accountability to funders; and 3) positive outcomes for stakeholders and program participants (Fetsch, MacPhee, & Boyer, 2012; Dunifon, Hill & Parker, 2005), the trend toward more use of programs backed by strong evaluation-based evidence is likely to continue. Additional benefits noted for use of evidence-based programming are increased efficiency (Olson, 2010) and increased positive reputation of Extension as a provider for family and youth programs (Mincemoyer, Perkins, Ang, Greenberg, Spoth, Redmond, & Feinberg 2008). This article describes a single state effort to increase the rigor of evaluation for an educational program for divorcing parents.

Divorce Education and Evaluative Research

Divorce education is one area of Extension FCS practice affected by this call for strengthened evaluation procedures. Divorce education strives to reduce negative post-divorce outcomes for parents and children. Court-mandated parent education programming is the most common intervention focused on easing parent and child adjustment to divorce (Amato, 2010). Across the nation, family courts have responded to the high prevalence of divorce by mandating parent education classes prior to divorce being granted as well as for never-married parents in child support disputes. Court-affiliated divorce education classes for parents aim to curtail negative impacts by providing parents with skills and information to promote children's adjustment, decrease conflict between parents, and minimize ongoing court involvement and re-litigation rates (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Grych, 2005; Blaisure & Geasler, 2006; Arbuthnot, 2002; Pedro-Carroll, 2005).

Extension Involvement

Extension's presence in divorce education has been documented in a recent national survey compiling responses of 116 Extension professionals from 48 states. Researchers found Extension involvement in divorce education in 22 states, including educational materials published online and development and provision of programs. These programs are now widespread, as shown by Extension educators reporting that 46 state court systems (92%) in the United States have state or local parent education mandates for divorcing family members (Mulroy, Riffe, Brandon, Lo, & Vaidyanath 2013). Mulroy and colleagues also found that among Extension-based programs for divorcing parents, the most frequently mentioned topics required to be taught included co-parenting strategies, the impact of divorce on children, and strategies to help parents and children with the transition.

Evaluation of Parent Education Programs

There is now a substantial body of literature reporting evaluations of education programs for divorcing parents. Multiple randomized experimental trials with large samples (generally not court-mandated audiences) indicate that a) parents can be taught improved parenting strategies and that b) these changes correspond with reduced mental health and substance abuse problems and improved academic functioning in children of divorced parents (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 2011).

However, a recent review of evaluations of 14 parent education programs concluded that while responding to needs, these programs, popular both with the courts and parents, show "little evidence that they are achieving their stated goals of improving the quantity of nonresidential parent-child contact, fostering the quality of parent-child relations by either the custodial or non-custodial parent, reducing interparental conflict, improving co-parenting, reducing relitigation or most importantly, improving outcomes for children." (Salem, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2013, p.135).

The authors stress that this lack of evidence is due to limitations of evaluation methodology and call for evaluative research that measures improvements in targeted parenting behaviors with strong established links to children's well-being. Evaluations examining whether classes are linked to desired outcomes such as reducing parental conflict call for including standardized measures for post-divorce conflict in program evaluation (Criddle, Allgood, & Piercy, 2003). Within Extension, researchers have found significant pre-post changes in knowledge about effective co-parenting communication strategies and skills (Brandon, 2006) and perceived program value (Brotherson, White, & Masich, 2010). A national-level task force is currently working on piloting a multistate evaluation of Extension-based divorce education programs (Shelton, 2013, February 15, telephone interview).

Program Overview

In two counties in north central Washington State, the Children Cope with Divorce (COPE)[®] program has been conducted since 1996. (COPE)[®] is based on research results linking program participation to reduced re-litigation and signs of positive children's adjustment and addresses core issues faced by divorcing families. The program is conducted by Extension as a licensed provider and meets local Superior Court requirements. Approximately 300 participants, primarily parents and a few additional family members, attend the class each year. Extension-trained male-female pairs of community professionals teach the 4-hour parent education class, offered monthly in English and quarterly in Spanish. The course addresses the following mechanisms known to buffer negative impact of divorce on parents and their children: information on co-parenting strategies with other parents and adults; ways to avoid placing children in unhealthy roles; key messages children need to hear from parents; familiarity with child development as well as with signs of healthy vs. unhealthy adjustment; and active listening techniques with children.

As part of an on-going longitudinal study, impact of the COPE[®] program has been documented by measuring gains in parenting knowledge as well as long-term changes both in class attendees and in their children's adjustment. An Extension evaluation team applied validated measures to measure changes in learning and parent and children's functioning immediately after the program and at two additional long-term intervals, 6 and 12 months post program. The evaluation aimed to:

1. Obtain quantitative baseline data using recognized and validated measures capturing a) the degree of conflict between the parents and b) children's general adjustment.
2. Document learner outcomes based on course material content areas and provide data related to parental learning knowledge. The researcher identified six program content based learning outcomes for program participants.

Methods

The sample consisted of program participants between December 2010 and June 2013, voluntarily or under court-mandate ($n=803$). Fifty-four percent of class participants were mothers, and 46% fathers; 67% of participants were Caucasian, not of Hispanic origin, and 26% were Hispanic. Other participants were from different ethnic groups including: American Indian, African, Asian, and mixed ethnic groups. The average number of children per couple was two, and the children's ages ranged from 1 month to 34 years.

Beginning in December 2010, the COPE® program evaluation team adopted the administration of three parent-report surveys. Participants completed surveys at three intervals: immediately after program participants completed their 4-hour course, and 6 and 12 months post program. Researchers conducted 6 and 12 month follow-ups through mailed, online, and telephone surveys, for which participants were asked to complete the same surveys they already completed immediately after the class to compare. Due to the short duration of the class (4 hours), researchers developed a post-then-pre retrospective questionnaire to measure six learning content outcomes. Learning outcomes included increased knowledge of a) stages of grief among both adults and children, b) active listening techniques for parents to adopt, c) community availability of social supports and resources, d) economic adjustments related to divorcing families, e) co-parenting strategies, and f) healthy versus unhealthy children's adjustment related to developmental stages.

Two validated scales were chosen as measures of the critical indicators of parent and child functioning. The Hostility/O'Leary-Porter Scale (OH-OPS) (Porter, 1980) assessed conflict between spouses, and Webster-Stratton's (1998) Social Competence Scale-Parent Scale (SCS-P) assessed children's adjustment at baseline when parents attended the class and again at 6 and 12 months to learn whether improvements occurred as a result of taking the class. In the SCS-P scale, participants noted whether they were reporting on more than one child and averaging them. If they were reporting on multiple children, participants provided qualitative responses by commenting on how each child's adjustment differed from siblings.

Additionally, the survey included open- and closed-ended questions to establish baseline information and determine intention to change behavior. Sample open-ended questions included "Please list any changes you plan to make as a result of what you have learned, seen, or heard today." (post-program) and "As a result of attending the class, have you taken any actions that have been of benefit to you or to the children? If so, please tell us about it." (6 month and 12 month follow ups).

Results

Scale reliability analyses for the researcher-created knowledge scale, OH-OPS, and SCS-P indicated high internal consistency reliabilities of $r_a = .79$, $.88$, and $.91$, respectively.

Changes in Knowledge

Comparisons between immediate pre-post knowledge scores revealed statistically significant and moderately large effect sizes for both specific learning knowledge content areas and overall perceived learning gains: $t(801) = 21.40$, $p < .001$, $d = .73$. Table 1 indicates participant knowledge change for

specific content areas.

Table 1.
Knowledge Change for Specific Content Areas

Content Area	Pre –Test Mean (SD)	Post Test Mean (SD)	Effect Size
a. Grief Process	3.8 (1.1)	4.5 (.8)	.73*
b. Active Listening Techniques	3.8 (1.1)	4.6 (.7)	.87*
c. Community Resources	3.4 (1.3)	4.1 (.9)	.63*
d. Economic changes	3.8 (1.4)	4.2 (.8)	.35*
e. Co-Parenting	3.7 (1.4)	4.5 (.7)	.72*
f. Child Development and Adjustment	3.8 (1.3)	4.5 (.7)	.67*
Overall	3.7 (1.1)	4.4 (.8)	.73*
* $p < .05$			

Changes in Inter-Parental conflict

Only 7% (53) of all participants completed the follow-up survey 6 months after program completion. For the following *t*-tests, respondents who did not participate in follow-up data collection were removed from subsequent analyses. Comparisons of initial and follow-up survey responses indicated a significant decrease in conflict between parents at 6 months, $t(52) = 4.0, p < .001, d = .78$. Similar results were found for the 9% (75) who completed the 12 month follow-up, $t(74) = 4.4, p < .001, d = .72$.

Non-Conclusive Changes in Children's Social Competence

Comparisons between initial and follow-up responses for both the 6 and 12 months post did not produce statistical significant benefits in social competence, $d = .07, .19$ and 0 , respectively.

Themes in Qualitative Responses

Many post program and 6 and 12 month post program responses centered around co-parenting and communication to build positive relationships with children. Examples of co-parenting changes, when asked about intended changes planned as a result of the class, are: "To be more communicative than I have (been) with my ex." and "Be more proactive and conscientious in my decisions with my boys and our parenting plan." When asked about actions taken as a result of the class that have been of any benefit to themselves or their children, example responses include: "I try very hard to never say anything negative about the kid's dad in front of them." (6 months post) and "kept all negative

comments about her dad to myself." (12 months post). Sample responses regarding building positive relationships with children are: "I plan on making more time to just talk to my kids about their feelings, (and to) give them a more 'open door'" (post-class), and "I try to spend more time with my boys." (6 months post response).

Discussion

Compared to similar divorce education programs, the COPE program evaluation indicated high levels of satisfaction and perceived learning. Findings from the study reported here provide evidence for learning gains and reduced parental conflict, but not increased social competence in children immediately after and at 6 and 12 months following the COPE program. Sample comments regarding children's adjustment asked 6 months and 12 months post program were "The younger seems to be having more difficulty than the older." More extensive or systematic qualitative analysis, although beyond the scope of the current study, would also capture the experiences of participants to enhance understanding about beneficial components of the program, the programs impacts, and/or other issues facing family members. Limitations in the study include low follow-up response rates (7% and 9% for six and 12 months, respectively) and lack of a control group, which are both common among court-mandated parent education program evaluations (Sigal et al., 2011). Given the low response rate at 6 and 12-month follow-ups, effect sizes may not be robust as a result of self-selecting biases.

Components of the COPE® evaluation design and process described are applicable to divorce education programs on a larger scale. The most useful features for Extension researchers and educators are the measures for course learning content and parental conflict. Future studies would benefit from the following adaptations.

- Testing participants' knowledge before and after taking the class in place of self-reports of learning to further strengthen validity and increase the evidence gained from such evaluations. This will also minimize social desirability issues often associated with the use of self-report instruments.
- Using a comparison group to determine whether the large effect sizes of parental conflict changes are attributed more to participating in divorce education classes, or if these changes are simply due to reduced frequency of parental contact following divorce.
- Comparing post-program effects of initially high-conflict and low-conflict parents. If it is the case that only parents with high degrees of parental conflict benefit significantly from divorce education programs like COPE; high OP-OHS scores could be used as selection criteria for class participants for supplemental or more intensive programming. This type of experimental design is needed in order to further justify offering specialized programs for higher conflict and/or higher needs parents.
- Finding more sensitive measures for children's adjustment and/or filtering data to focus on changes among parents who report children with below-normal adjustment levels prior to taking the class.

Implications

The study reported here serves as one example of Extension educators using practical steps to increase the evidence base of a theory-driven program as recommended by Fetsch, MacPhee, and

Boyer (2012). This evaluation can add to conversations about establishing program fidelity and best practices for measuring effectiveness of divorcing parent education programs. Measurement approaches for key variables such as reduced interparental conflict could be replicated by Extension faculty responsible for designing, delivering, and evaluating these programs. Testing outcomes using the same measures across similar programs within Extension could also increase the likelihood of promised benefits that evidence-based programming brings greater documentation of program effectiveness, increased accountability, and maximized chances for positive stakeholder and program participant outcomes. In addition, these findings may be incorporated into future trainings for such programs.

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