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Jeong-Kyun Choi

University of Nebraska-Lincol, choi@unl.edu

Holly Hatton-Bowers

University of Nebraska-Lincol

Anna Burton

University of Nebraska-Lincol

Gail Brand

Nebraska Extension-Statewide

Linda Reddish

Nebraska Extension–Douglas-Sarpy County

See next page for additional authors

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A Qualitative Evaluation to Improve the Co-Parenting for Successful Kids Program

Authors

Jeong-Kyun Choi, Holly Hatton-Bowers, Anna Burton, Gail Brand, Linda Reddish, and Lisa M. Poppe

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Jeong-Kyun Choi

Holly Hatton-Bowers

Anna Burton

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Gail Brand

Nebraska Extension-Statewide

Linda Reddish

Nebraska Extension–Douglas-Sarpy County

Lisa M. Poppe

Nebraska Extension–Dodge County

Programs aiming to help parents are often challenged in analyzing open-ended survey questions from large samples. This article presents qualitative findings collected from 1,287 participants with a child 5 years of age or younger who completed the program evaluation for the Co-Parenting for Successful Kids online program, a 4-hour education course developed by the University of Nebraska Extension. Qualitative content analysis revealed that participants found the program useful for improving their co-parenting communication skills. Participants suggested areas for improvement such as additional information for helping children cope, conflict resolution strategies, handling legal issues, and understanding how divorce impacts children based on their age. Supports and information were requested from parents in high conflict situations, including families dealing with a co-parent's alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and having an uninvolved or absent parent. Analyzing qualitative data from participants and quantifying these responses into themes offers a useful and informative way to improve and enhance an existing education program aiming to support separating or divorcing parents.

Keywords: co-parenting, divorce, online education, qualitative analysis, program needs

Direct correspondence to Jeong-Kyun Choi at jchoi@unl.edu

Introduction

A common challenge for program evaluation is collecting open-ended information from participants because of the cost and time involved. Although open-ended questions are a useful and comprehensive way to probe new insights and perspectives from program participants, it can be challenging to analyze raw, open-ended data from large sample sizes (Culp & Pilat, 1998). However, qualitatively examining participants' perceived usefulness of a program can support efforts for program improvement. Our study used qualitative content analysis to evaluate the *Co-Parenting for Successful Kids* online program and provides implications for further development of the program. Using a qualitative approach, such as content analysis, may contribute to implementing programs with more confidence by reflecting participants' feedback to open-ended questions.

Qualitative Approach for Improving Co-parenting Programs

It is well documented that the cooperative relationship between divorced parents is associated with positive developmental outcomes for their children (Cabrera & Bradley, 2012; Yarnoz-Yaben & Garmendia, 2015). Parents can help reduce their children's risk of emotional and behavioral problems by using cooperative co-parenting and avoiding hostile exchanges during separation and divorce (Frieman, Garon, & Garon, 2000; Johnston & Girdner, 1998). Co-parenting programs are the most common intervention used to reduce negative post-divorce outcomes and promote healthy adjustment and development for parents and children (Amato, 2010). Across the nation, local or state courts in 46 states have mandated co-parenting education programs for divorcing parents and never-married parents in child support disputes (Mulroy, Riffe, Brandon, Lo, & Vaidyananth, 2013). These court-affiliated co-parenting programs provide parents with skills and information to promote children's adjustment, decrease interparental conflict, and minimize ongoing court involvement (Arbuthnot, 2002; Blaisure & Geasler, 2006; Grych, 2005; Pedro-Carroll, 2005; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008).

A substantial body of research has examined the impacts of co-parenting programs for divorcing parents, with a focus on perceiving parental change in knowledge as an immediate outcome. Findings suggest that co-parenting programs help divorcing parents improve their understanding in the areas of the grief process, child development and adjustment, co-parenting skills, communication techniques, and conflict resolution strategies (Brandon, 2006; Chen, 2002; Crawford, Riffe, Trevisan, & Adescope, 2014; Criddle, Allgood, & Piercy, 2003; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999). In general, program educators and evaluators collect both quantitative and qualitative data to measure program outcomes and receive participants' feedback (for example, Crawford et al., 2014); however, descriptive responses are less likely to be utilized in studies with large samples.

In one study among a sample of 20 nonresident divorced fathers, Stone, Clark, and McKenry (2000) conducted in-depth interviews to explore fathers' perceptions of their divorce experience, post-divorce adjustment, co-parenting experience, and their experiences participating in a divorce education program (i.e., *Parents' Education About Children's Emotions: P.E.A.C.E.*). Results indicated the program was perceived to be useful, even by fathers who initially opposed the mandatory nature of the program. Fathers also reported benefiting from the educational components of the program. This qualitative approach provided implications for program improvements; however, the findings were based on a relatively small sample. The present study examined divorcing parents' perceptions of program usefulness and their needs for future learning for the Co-Parenting for Successful Kids program among a large sample of divorcing or separating mothers and fathers.

The Co-Parenting for Successful Kids Program

Co-Parenting for Successful Kids (Co-Parenting) is a mandatory program designed for parents experiencing separation, custody disputes, and divorce that is required by the state of Nebraska. The program has been offered to over 15,000 parents caring for over 25,000 children since it started in 1999. Both online and on-site location classes are currently available. Only information collected from the online course was examined in this study. This enabled us to analyze the data without having to control for confounding factors, such as differences in the characteristics of trainers or the delivery of content. Participants may take the online course in one approximately 4-hour setting or break it up into 8 segments that meet individual scheduling needs. On average, it takes about 30–45 minutes to read and understand the information and complete assignments in each module. This online platform uses a web-based presentation tool where audio and video files as well as written documents (printable and downloadable) are embedded. The program curriculum consists of 8 education modules and 56 sublearning components using 83 webpages, 7 videos, 31 audios, 6 research-based information articles titled NebGuides, and 3 activities. The modules included (1) how children are affected by divorce, (2) developmental issues by age group, (3) communication conflicts, (4) parenting styles, (5) discipline, (6) keeping children out of the middle, (7) parenting plans, and (8) stress management. The communication conflicts module has approximately three times more information than the other modules. When completing the modules, participants engage in reflection activities to examine their understanding of the concepts being taught. After learning each module, parents are required to complete a reflection activity, such as “writing a letter to my child,” and then submit this reflection to an Extension educator. The Extension educator then provides feedback to the participant about his/her reflection. Extension educators also respond to any questions the participants may have.

Method

Data and Sample

We used a subsample of data from the Co-Parenting online program evaluation collected in 2015. Parents who completed the on-site program were excluded. The study sample consisted of 1,287 parents with a focal child 5 years old or younger. The program evaluation is designed to measure changes in participants' knowledge and behavior after completing the online program and collect their feedback about the program. This evaluative survey consists of scales (e.g., knowledge and behavior changes), multiple choice questions (e.g., demographic information), and open-ended questions (e.g., perceived usefulness and future learning needs). The current study analyzed only demographic characteristics and open-ended questions.

Table 1 shows participants' characteristics. Over half of the participants were mothers (56.8%). Approximately 8.5% identified as Hispanic or Latino. Most of the participants identified themselves as White (90.1%), which reflects the demographics of the state in which the surveys were collected. The majority of the participants indicated they had a divorce pending and were seeking custody (60.8%) followed by 355 parents (30.2%) who were never married and seeking custody. Their focal child (youngest) was, on average, 2.55 years of age ($SD = 1.49$). A quarter of their children were 1-year-old or younger (25.2%).

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics ($N = 1,287$)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	1,286	100.0
Male	556	43.2
Female	730	56.8
Ethnicity	1,277	100.0
Hispanic or Latino	109	8.5
Not Hispanic or Latino	1,168	91.5
Race	1,269	100.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	18	1.4
Asian	9	0.7
Black or African American	27	2.1
White	1,161	91.5
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	5	0.4
Other	49	3.9
Relationship and child custody status	1,177	100.0
Separated, seeking divorce	21	1.8
Never married, seeking custody	355	30.2
Never married, custody finalized	15	1.3
Divorce pending, seeking custody (sole or joint)	716	60.8
Divorce final, seeking custody modification	70	5.9

Characteristic (continued)	Frequency	Percentage
Child age (youngest)	1,287	100.0
1 year or younger	324	25.2
2 years	349	27.1
3 years	224	17.4
4 years	219	17.0
5 years	171	13.3

Measures

Program usefulness. Participants were asked to describe what information, idea, or approach they learned during the program that would be most useful for them in the future. For this open-ended question, participants could write their thoughts up to 2,000 characters or approximately 300 words. The length of their responses ranged from a single word (e.g., “communication” or “parenting”) to sentences (maximum = 66 words). On average, their responses were 5.74 words long ($SD = 6.54$). About half of the responses (48.3%) were longer than a sentence (4 words or longer); others (41.7%) contained three words or less. The remaining participants (10.0%) provided no response to this question.

Future learning needs. This question asked participants to report what they wanted to learn more about in future lessons. The participants were again allowed to use up to 2,000 characters. The length of their responses ranged from a single word (e.g., “communication” or “parenting”) to sentences (maximum = 83 words). On average, their responses were 5.83 words long ($SD = 8.71$). Less than a quarter of the responses (23.5%) were 3 words or shorter; 44% were longer than a sentence (4 words or longer). Around a third (32.4%) were nonresponses or invalid responses (e.g., “nothing” or “not sure”) for this question.

Analysis Methods

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify themes from participants’ responses to the two open-ended questions about their perceived usefulness of the information and future learning needs. The qualitative content analysis identified individual themes as the unit of analysis which was derived from a single word, phrase, or sentence using MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2016). The coding scheme was developed deductively by using the theories and key concepts taught in the Co-parenting curriculum. Three members of the research team (HH, AB, JC) developed the coding scheme, and during the course of the analysis, new categories were added as they emerged. For this initial coding, a unit of text could be assigned to more than one category. A researcher (HH) with training in qualitative methods provided instructions and guidance. To ensure clarity and consistency in the category definitions, a sample of the data was analyzed. Fifty (50) free text responses were analyzed for each question and were coded independently for intercoder agreement by two researchers (HH, AB). Questions and issues with

the definitions of categories, coding rules, and categorization of particular responses were discussed and resolved with the research team (HH, AM, JC). A total of 61 categories for program usefulness, including answers such as “everything” and “nothing” as well as nonresponses and 33 categories for the future learning needs were identified.

All of the data were coded by two researchers (AB, JC) using the predetermined coding scheme. Although over 1,000 free text responses per question were explored for coding, about 40% of the responses were concise, straightforward, and no longer than a sentence (often two or three words; for example, “parenting skills”). Lengthy responses were cross-examined by the two researchers coding the information (AB, JC) to determine if they represented new categories, subcategories of existing codes, or multiple categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For example, a statement of “*Don’t play 20 questions, and also learning that my type of parenting is ‘democratic’ and learning how this affects my daughter*” was initially coded into three categories: “game playing” (code = 33), “parenting style” (code = 6), and “child-centered learning” (code = 3). After initial coding, “game playing” was regrouped and recoded into “keeping children out of middle” (code = 9) because we found that “Don’t Play 20 Questions” was a learning activity to keep children out of middle when co-parents have conflicts. Likewise, “child-centered learning” was also regrouped into “how divorce affects children” (code = 1).

For the responses that could not be coded, open coding with temporal labeling and memos was used to sort data and track decision making until categories emerged. No conflicts or discrepancies between coders were found. Also during the coding process, the two coders (AB, JC) checked their coding repeatedly to maintain consistency with the coding scheme. A third researcher (HH) randomly reviewed 50 responses for each question to check for intercoder agreement. There was disagreement for 3 of the 50 responses which were resolved in a research meeting with the three coders (AB, JC, HH). After the completion of coding, data were presented descriptively by code. During the coding, we also examined if different codes emerged based on relationship and custody status. The codes that were pre-identified and that emerged did not differ based on these characteristics. Based on frequency and similarity, we merged and regrouped the predetermined codes into 14 categories for both questions: (1) how divorce affects children (e.g., children’s risk behaviors and signs), (2) helping children cope with emotions, (3) conflict resolution, (4) communication, (5) “I” messages, (6) parenting styles, (7) parenting skills and activities, (8) discipline, (9) keeping children out of the middle, (10) positive statements, (11) co-parenting, (12) parenting plan, (13) legal issues (e.g., mediation, self-representation, etc.), and (14) stress management. In preparing the findings, exemplars for each category were taken from the data.

Results

What They Found Useful

Among these 14 learning topics, 27.8% of the participants reported “I” messages as the most useful strategy learned (see Table 2), followed by parenting plans (10.7%), how divorce affects children (10.0%), discipline (9.1%), and communication (7.7%). Many participants stated that “it was extremely helpful” to learn how to “use ‘I messages’ instead of using the word ‘you’ to express how I feel.” A participant reported that it was important to “work together with the other parent and keep communicating.” “Learning strategies. . . for how to handle conflict(s) when a parenting plan is made” was also described as a useful lesson by a single parent of an 8-month-old child.

Other topics such as keeping children out of the middle (5.8%), parenting skills and activities (5.4%), positive statements (3.8%), and helping children cope with emotions (3.1%) were less frequently mentioned but still identified as the most useful information learned. A mother of two young children reported that “criticizing my spouse could be seen as criticizing them (children).” A father of three children ages 4, 5, and 11 wrote that the most important information learned was, “How to keep the focus on the children, not (on) the other parent . . . I will focus more on the needs of my children when I have them, and focus less on what I feel they need with the other parent.” Some participants found conflict resolution (2.3%) and legal issues (0.6%) useful, stating “the videos with the lawyer (on legal issues such as mediation, self-represented divorce, and parenting plan) really helped.” Without specifying, 62 participants reported that all topics were useful; a single-mother of a 17-month-old child stated:

Honestly, this course was very beneficial and I would recommend this to anyone, together or not, to show the best examples of “real life” and how working together works so much better for everyone involved rather than working “against.” These tools I learned will help me for years to come raising my son, and I am glad that I was able to take away knowledge from this course.

In contrast, 15 participants found nothing useful; a mother of four children whose father is in the military reported that “nothing really (was useful since) I have had my children alone for years.” A single father of a 4-year-old child expressed, “nothing will be useful. I already tried all these methods. My child’s mother would not use this program. That is why it will not work.”

Table 2. Participants' Reported Program Usefulness

Topic	Program Usefulness	
	Frequency	Percentage
"I" messages	332	27.8
Parenting plans	128	10.7
How divorce affects children	119	10.0
Discipline	109	9.1
Communication	92	7.7
Stress management	77	6.4
Co-parenting	69	5.8
Keeping children out of middle	69	5.8
Parenting skills and activities	65	5.4
Positive statements	45	3.8
Children's coping with emotions	37	3.1
Conflict resolution	27	2.3
Parenting styles	19	1.6
Legal issues	7	0.6
Total (14 topics)	1,195	100.0
14 topics	1,195	84.3
No response	129	9.2
Everything	62	4.4
Nothing	15	1.1
Unclear	8	0.6
Total	1,409*	100.0

*Some parents indicated more than one topic.

Future Learning Needs

With regard to the participants' future learning needs, the results indicated they wanted to learn more about how divorce affects children (18.8%), communication (13.4%), helping children cope with emotions (11.6%), parenting plans (9.7%), stress management (7.5%), discipline (7.4%), parenting styles (7.2%), conflict resolution (7.0%), and legal issues (6.4%) (see Table 3). The biggest request for additional information was in terms of how the divorce process may affect children's development. The mother of a 22-month-old child said, "I will continue to read up on the different stages [of child development]." Participants indicated that they wanted to learn more about "how to help children adjust to divorce" and "how to help my child when he is so young to even speak but somehow let him know he will continue to see us both if there was a way for a one-year old to know."

Table 3. Participants' Future Learning Needs

Topic	Future Learning Needs	
	Frequency	Percentage
How divorce affects children	102	18.8
Communication	73	13.4
Help children cope with emotions	63	11.6
Parenting plan	53	9.7
Stress management	41	7.5
Discipline	40	7.4
Parenting styles	39	7.2
Conflict resolution	38	7.0
Legal issues	35	6.4
Parenting skills and activities	21	3.9
Co-parenting	16	2.9
Positive statements	13	2.4
"I" messages	9	1.7
Keep children out of middle	1	0.2
Total (14 topics)	544	100.0
14 topics	544	42.0
No response	417	32.2
Nothing	151	11.7
Other	131	10.1
Not sure	51	3.9
Total	1,294*	100.0

*Some parents indicated more than one topic.

A number of participants also reported that they wanted to learn more about "communication with the other parent," "communication skills," "interpersonal communication techniques," and "dealing with communication without involving the child." Another group of participants indicated "parenting plan(s)," which was also related to legal issues. For example, a custody-seeking father of a 4-year-old child stated that "it would be nice to have some sort of legal person(s) who could (share) their ideas and experiences. The parenting plan video was very informative and . . . this course could benefit more from that type of expertise level." In contrast, some topics including "I" messages and keeping children out of the middle were rarely mentioned as a future learning need. Only a few participants expressed that they wanted to learn more about these topics. This suggests that the participants learned about "I" messages and how to keep children out of the middle well enough to meet their learning needs.

In addition to the 14 topics the program provided, 131 (10%) of the responses conveyed new topics for future learning needs (see Table 4). A number of participants expressed their learning needs for anger management such as "ways to cope with anger and aggression more" and "let(ing) go of the anger, hate, betrayal, and sadness." A group of participants wanted to learn

more about how to deal with drug abuse and domestic violence. Stating that “my child’s father . . . is/was a drug abuser,” some mentioned that they wanted to learn “how alcohol and drug abuse (could) affect kids” and “how to parent with the other parent when there is alcohol addiction, bipolar disorder/depression, and domestic violence.” A legally-separated mother of a 23-month-old child suggested that the program should have focused on high conflict situations and addressed:

what to do when you (are) going through a divorce where the other parent is unfit, angry, abusing drugs and alcohol, and is not a safe parent for your child to be around. I would have probably learned more and had more help if there were an option to take a parenting course based on that kind of divorce with a child scenario.

Other participants was interested in how to continue to learn by using books, research articles, and other resources. Financial hardship was one of the common topics for which they wanted more information, stating that they wanted to know more about “money issues,” “financial help available,” and “the financial ramifications of separation and divorce.” How to parent without a co-parent (e.g., absent parent or single parenthood) was found to be another topic of interest. A custodial father of a 3.5-year-old child requested “how to deal with being a single parent who has to share time with the other parent who never wanted time or asked about the child because child support was requested from the absent parent.” Three participants mentioned that learning about depression would be helpful. A mother stated that “I would’ve liked to learn more about depression. That was challenging for me in the beginning.” Other suggestions included stepparenthood, child behavior problems, new relationships, depression, and military parents.

Table 4. New Curriculum Needs

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Anger management (e.g., temper, aggression)	14	10.7
Resources (e.g., books, research)	14	10.7
Alcohol, drug, abuse, domestic violence	12	9.2
Financial issues	11	8.4
Absent parent	11	8.4
Stepparenthood	10	7.6
Child behavior problems (e.g., trauma)	9	6.9
Single parenthood	9	6.9
New relationships (e.g., dating)	8	6.1
Long-term effects of divorce	5	3.8
Deal with the co-parent’s partner or family	4	3.1
Depression	3	2.3
Effects of bad parenting	2	1.5
Unmarried but seeking custody	2	1.5

Topic (continued)	Frequency	Percentage
Military parents	2	1.5
Safety issues for children	2	1.5
Prevent divorce	2	1.5
Personal counselor	1	0.8
Nutrition	1	0.8
Time management	1	0.8
Build personal character (e.g., independence)	1	0.8
Support group	1	0.8
Unknown father	1	0.8
Special needs child	1	0.8
Personal character	1	0.8
Living together in divorce pending	1	0.8
Understanding young adults	1	0.8
Healthy lifestyles	1	0.8
Total	131	100.0

Discussion

Based on the results, we provide implications and suggestions for further development of the Co-Parenting program. The Co-Parenting program was useful for improving communication skills. In particular, a communication strategy using “I” messages was most frequently mentioned as a useful topic; while only a few participants still wanted to learn more about it. This finding suggests that the program effectively and clearly delivered how to express feelings and thoughts using “I” rather than “you” messages.

Participants identified learning about how divorce affects children as one of the most useful topics as well as their highest demand for future learning. The participants expressed their strong interests in the current and future developmental issues of their children as they were growing. Helping children cope with emotions was also found as a great concern of parents. The current program addresses how parents can assist their children’s adjustment by explaining a list of emotions, symptoms, and signs that children might display. Participants suggested having more detailed information with examples about how to handle specific emotions and apply coping skills based on the developmental stage of the child. Co-parenting programs for divorcing or separating families may benefit from incorporating information about developmental signs that indicate when children may need more support. It may be beneficial for the program to provide follow-up information, newsletters, updates, and referrals for further learning opportunities, support groups, and community resources. Contact information for these resources and supports, such as child psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, school social workers, and mental health care providers, should be included.

A large number of participants found that parenting plans were a useful topic, but they still wanted to learn more. In particular, having a legal expert explain a parenting plan with an online video was perceived as an effective educational tool. Incorporating more educational videos may improve the impact of online divorce education programs as previous research finds that educational videos are effective ways for facilitating behavior change (Ramsay, Holyoke, Branen, & Fletcher, 2012). Although the current program contains several examples of parenting plans in documents for the parent to download (i.e., NebGuides), we found that many parents wanted more examples. The program structure or the format of information should be revised in a more accessible, interactive, and visible way.

Lastly, findings suggest that participants identified new learning components that the program could adopt and ways to structure the program that would be most meaningful to them. While many did not provide information for additional learning topics, those who did requested information for how to handle high conflict situations, such as anger management, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, and having an uninvolved or absent parent. Results from a national survey of Extension parenting education programs suggested that many divorce education programs contain topics about domestic violence, legal issues, and financial obligations (Mulroy et al., 2013), which are topics that the current Co-Parenting program does not address. New educational modules should be continuously developed in collaboration with relevant experts. It may be beneficial to develop programs that are individually tailored based on the learning needs of participants. For example, parents who have high conflict divorces may benefit from receiving additional education on this topic or participating in a program that is uniquely tailored to their learning needs.

Study Limitations

Although our study collected meaningful information, it is limited in several ways that should be acknowledged. First, there was an extensive amount of missing data for both of the open-ended questions. Second, we focused on “what” they found useful and wanted to learn more about; however, we did not ask “why” and “how” they felt that way. A more in-depth investigation (e.g., individual or focus group interviews) is recommended to answer these questions. Third, we excluded on-site co-parenting programs. On-site programs should be included in future research.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, analyzing the open-ended responses asked in the program evaluation provided rich and meaningful information. Quantifying the responses into categories and highlighting some exemplar quotes offers a useful and informative way to improve and enhance an existing program, such as this co-parenting program. We were able to identify groups of

parents in need of additional supports and information, including those with high conflict divorces and those experiencing anger. We can now begin to improve our program delivery in these areas.

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Jeong-Kyun Choi, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Extension Specialist in Children and Poverty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Dr. Choi's areas of specialization are poverty, parenting and co-parenting relations, family process, and child health and development.

Holly Hatton-Bowers, PhD, is an Assistant Professor and Early Childhood Extension Specialist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Dr. Hatton-Bowers specializes in the quality of early childhood development, early care and education, and caregiving and health in early childhood.

Anna Burton, M.Ed., is a PhD student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her specializations are early childhood education quality and pedagogy.

Gail Brand, MS is an Emeriti Extension Educator at Nebraska Extension. Ms. Brand's area of specialization is in early childhood, parenting, and co-parenting relations.

Linda Reddish, MEd, is an Extension Educator with the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Nebraska Extension. Her key programming areas are co-parenting, divorce, and early childhood education and development.

Lisa M. Poppe, MS, is an Extension Educator with The Learning Child Team at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Ms. Poppe specializes in the social and emotional development of children from birth to eight years.