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A Review of Children in the Middle: Divorce Education for Parents

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Abstract: This article reviews Children in the Middle: Divorce Education for Parents on the extent to which the materials are research based and empirically validated as well as whether the program meets the needs of divorcing families, especially children, as identified in the research literature. The need for divorce education is summarized using empirical research. A program description reveals the program contents and typical administration of Children in the Middle. Empirical research supporting Children in the Middle is provided to highlight program effectiveness. Children in the Middle may be a valuable tool for Cooperative Extension to implement in counties where divorce education is needed.

The Need for Divorce Education Programs in Extension

Cooperative Extension has been involved in divorce education through programs such as Focus on Kids, Parents Forever, and Helping Children Deal with Divorce. Another program, Children in the Middle, from the Center for Divorce Education, also seems promising as an evidence-based and empirically effective divorce education program. Cooperative Extension agents may want to consider advocating for *Children in the Middle* as the program of choice where divorcing couples are mandated to divorce education.

Grych (2005) summarized empirical research showing how interparental conflict operates as a risk factor for child maladjustment outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and disruptive behavior, as well as higher rates of divorce and maladjustment in adulthood. Cummings and Davies (2002) described the damaging effects of marital conflict on children, emphasizing the role of marital conflict rather than marital dissolution in predicting poor outcomes in children. Divorce education programs such as *Children in the Middle* may play an important role in reducing parental conflict and teaching parents how to minimize their children's exposure to conflict.

Program Description

The Center for Divorce Education (CDE) emerged in 1987 as a partnership between lawyers and psychologists to provide educational materials to agencies involved in classes for divorcing families. Some goals of the CDE include: educating people in the public, legal, and legislative sectors about the effects of divorce on parenting and the social and emotional development of children; distributing educational materials to divorcing families; and promoting effective education programs for families that minimize any harmful effects of divorce (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 2001). Children in the Middle (CIM), one of the CDE's most widely distributed programs for divorcing families, has received several awards, including recognition as a "model program" from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Active Parenting Award from the National Council for Children's Rights (The Center for Divorce Education, 2008).

CIM is a brief, skills-based program that aims to help parents and children deal effectively with common reactions and problems following divorce. The target population of CIM consists of children aged 3 to 15 years and their divorcing parents. CIM is typically administered in one or two 90-120 minute sessions with 12 to 20 parents. Children's programs using the children's version of CIM may be held in school settings or provided by mental health professionals or social service agencies. The program consists of a 37-minute parents' video, a 30-minute children's video, power point slides, a *Discussion Leader's Guide*, *Children in the Middle: A Parents' and Children's Guidebook*, and *What About the Children: A Guide for Divorced and Divorcing Parents*.

The parents' video highlights harmful ways that parents sometimes interact (putting children in the middle of parental loyalty conflicts or handling conflict inappropriately in front of children), and participants are asked to analyze the situation and its possible negative effects on children. The video follows up the negative interaction with a situation highlighting effective parental communication that minimizes children's exposure to conflict. The children's video works to help children understand more about why parents divorce and dispels many myths that children often encounter, such as thinking their parents' divorce is their fault or that they might help their parents get back together. The children's video also includes lessons in stress, anger management, and problem-solving skills. The parents' and children's guidebook summarizes and extends the skills from the video and provides exercises and activities to reinforce materials from the videos. Parents and their children may view the child-focused video together and complete the exercises and activities at home together.

What About the Children: A Guide for Divorced and Divorcing Parents is provided for participants. It summarizes the effects of divorce on children, moderating variables on those effects, and practical instruction on ways parents may increase their children's protective factors and reduce their risk factors. This 40-page booklet was written by Jack Arbuthnot and Donald A. Gordon, who include their views and positions emerging from the best available research and clinical and judicial experience. An extensive bibliography is included to provide evidence for the information provided and the recommendations given. The bibliography includes many published academic journal references as well as books and reports.

The CIM program is available in Spanish with open captioning. *After the Storm* is a program similar to CIM, but it is designed especially for high conflict marriages. This program stresses the importance of shielding children from exposure to high-level parental conflict.

Program Evaluation

SAMHSA reported that eight evaluations of CIM have been conducted with over 1,000 participants

representing diverse ethnic groups in court settings, schools, community agencies, and therapists' offices. Some of these evaluations utilized random assignment to treatment and control groups as well as alternate treatment groups. Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis, and Hoza (1998) evaluated CIM using a randomized control design by comparing it with Children First in Divorce (CFD) and a no treatment control group. Pre- and post-tests revealed that only CIM improved parental communications, CIM and CFD reduced children's exposure to parental conflict, but neither program had an effect on domestic violence, parental conflict, or children's behavior problems.

Arbuthnot, Kramer, and Gordon (1997) found that parents who participated in CIM as opposed to parents who did not participate in divorce education had lower rates of relitigation within 2 years following their divorce. Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) evaluated parents who participated in CIM using pre- and post-testing and a non-randomized no treatment control group. Parents in the treatment group perceived the classes to be useful and realistic. When compared with parents in the control group, parents in the treatment group reported exposing their children to less conflict and putting their children in the middle of parental conflict less following CIM participation. Parents in the treatment group maintained their skill mastery at a 6-month follow-up.

Evaluation Criteria and Conclusions

- Is the material clearly research based? Yes, the CIM materials include a bibliography of published research in the area of parental conflict and divorce's effects on children.
- Does the material address the needs of divorcing families as identified in the research literature? Yes, CIM addresses key risk factors such as parental conflict and loyalty conflicts as well as protective factors in order for parents to minimize negative effects of divorce on their children.
- Is there empirical evidence of the class's effectiveness for improving parental behaviors or children's outcomes? Yes, some research indicates that parents reduce their children's exposure to parental conflict (especially loyalty conflicts), but research on children's behavioral or emotional outcomes are inconclusive.

Cooperative Extension agents may want to consider using Children in the Middle with divorcing couples who are mandated to divorce education.

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