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Parents Forever: Evaluation of a Divorce Education Curriculum

Abstract

Parents Forever is an educational program developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service for families experiencing divorce. It was designed to help parents: a) eliminate parent conflict in front of the children; b) keep the children out of the middle of parent issues; c) provide access to both parents; and d) put the best interests of the children first. Eighty-nine parents were interviewed via telephone after completing the course about the impact of Parents Forever on parental behaviors. Analyses revealed that Parents Forever is effective in meeting its four objectives. Implications for divorce education programming are outlined.

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High divorce rates have produced a growing number of children who experience interparental conflict prior to and following divorce (Shifflett & Cummings, 1999). In fact, nearly 10% of all young people under the age of 18 live with one parent as a result of divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Researchers have found that children who experience divorce are often more susceptible to developing emotional and behavioral difficulties than children who do not experience divorce. Thus, it is critical to examine parents' role in their children's adjustment. By becoming aware of the ways divorce can influence children, parents may decrease or prevent some of the negative impacts of divorce on their children (Shifflett & Cummings, 1999). Indeed, three quarters of children and adults who experience divorce do not show long-term serious problems. Divorce even leads to an improved life for many adults (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Educational programs are one way to help parents support their children through divorce and avoid long-term problems. Evaluation studies have concluded that educational programs help parents better understand their children (Chen, 2002) and interact with them around issues related to divorce (Gaydos, 1999; Johnson, 2000).

The investigation reported here explored the impact of Parents Forever, a comprehensive educational program for families in divorce transition, to help parents:

- a. Eliminate parent conflict in front of the children;
- b. Keep the children out of the middle of parent issues;
- c. Provide access to both parents; and
- d. Put the best interests of the children first.

Parents Forever

Parents Forever is a research-based divorce education curriculum developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service in collaboration with other professionals. It is taught by Extension educators and community partners who have been trained by Extension educators to teach the curriculum. Parents Forever addresses the following five content areas, which may require a total of 12 hours of teaching.

1. **Impact of divorce on adults:** Helps parents understand the divorce process and suggests ways to cope constructively with the accompanying stress, anger, and conflict. These materials address safety issues, including spousal abuse, child abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases.
2. **Impact of divorce on children:** Focuses on what children experience and how parents can lead their children through this time of transition, while helping them regain a sense of stability.
3. **Legal issues and role of mediation in divorce:** Discusses how to choose a lawyer, defines legal terms, explains basic divorce procedures, and discusses child custody and child support. An introduction to mediation is provided, so parents can consider mediation as a way to make divorce and custody decisions.
4. **Money issues in divorce:** Suggests ways to cope with the emotional, social, and economic impacts of living with reduced income, including how parents can talk with children of various ages about money. Information is presented on how to plan a new budget and calculate the cost of raising children.
5. **Pathways to a new life:** Deals with communication skills and other tools useful for starting life anew; including a discussion of challenges and benefits that may accompany this new direction, such as, reconciliation with the other parent, single parenting, new relationships, and remarriage.

In addition to addressing these five areas, each *Parents Forever* site compiles a list of local resources (e.g., parenting classes, mediation, mental health services, etc.) that is distributed to parents, to increase their awareness of services that they might also need.

Parents in Minnesota are court ordered to attend parent education in cases where custody or visitation is contested. Interpretation of "contested" is left to the discretion of the judge. The Minnesota Supreme Court adopted parent education standards for parents experiencing divorce that outlines twenty-five required content areas. These content areas emerged from the content of Parents Forever.

Method

Parents enrolled in Parents Forever classes during 1998 and 1999 were recruited from Parents Forever site coordinators across Minnesota. A list of 378 parents who had completed Parents Forever 4-8 months (on average 6 months) earlier and 369 parents who had completed the classes 10-13 months (on average 12 months) earlier was compiled. The target sample was 100 telephone interviews--50 from each pool. A random sample of these parents was selected for telephone interviews. Given the high mobility of this population, interviewers conducted 89 telephone interviews after attempting to contact 292 randomly selected parents. Twenty-nine counties (20 Parents Forever sites) were represented in this group.

Of the interviewed parents, 44 were from the 6-month group and 45 from the 12-month group (see Table 1). Independent t-tests were conducted to determine whether parents in the 6-month pool were significantly different from parents in the 12-month pool. The only significant difference was that more parents in the 12-month pool shared legal custody of their children. Because there was no reason to suspect this would result in significant differences between the two groups, analyses were computed for the entire sample.

Table 1.
Telephone Interview Participants

	Mothers	Fathers
N	51	38
Years married to divorcing spouse (mean)	10 years	13 years
Age (mean)	38 years	41 years

1 or 2 children	34	27
Custodial parent	40	10
Shared legal custody	9	9
Court mandated to attend Parents Forever	43	31
Note: Cells=n unless otherwise noted		

The telephone interview instrument consisted of 26 questions, including background information and open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Interview questions were clustered around the four objectives of Parents Forever. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviewer recorded detailed notes throughout the interview.

Results

First, results are reported for the open-ended questions. Quotes from parents representing the themes that emerged from these data are used to exemplify these findings. Next, results are reported for the multiple-choice questions. Not every parent responded to every question; as a result, sample size is reduced in some cases.

Parents' responses to the open-ended questions clustered into two main categories: course topics (Figure 1) and course format (Figure 2).

Course Topics

Impact of Divorce on Adults

The first content area of the Parents Forever curriculum is designed to help parents understand and constructively deal with divorce. These parents discussed improvements in communication as well as an overall improvement in their relationship with their ex-partner. Most notably, parents described being better able to understand their ex-partner's point of view, a critical part of co-parenting post-divorce.

Impact of Divorce on Children

The second content area of Parents Forever is designed to help parents understand and support their children through the divorce transition. Parents described being better able to understand and communicate with their children, as well as do better in keeping their children out of the middle of parental conflict. Many parents described wanting more information on the impact of divorce on children and expressed an interest in having their children participate in an educational program around the divorce transition.

Legal Issues and the Role of Mediation in Divorce

The third content area of Parents Forever is designed to provide parents with information on legal issues and the role of mediation. Many parents reported that because of their limited legal knowledge, learning basic legal facts, divorce procedures, the mediation process, and guidelines around child custody and child support were beneficial.

Money Issues in Divorce

The fourth content area of Parents Forever is designed to help parents deal with reduced income and plan a realistic budget. When a divorce occurs, there is often a significant change in at least one parent's financial situation. Parents described utilizing the financial information to better manage their finances.

Pathways to a New Life

The fifth content area of Parents Forever is focused on helping parents start a new chapter in their lives. Parents explained that *Parents Forever* helped normalize their experience of divorce. Attending *Parents Forever* classes also reinforced the good family choices they were already making and their positive coping strategies.

Figure 1.
Quotes from Parents Describing the Course Content of Parents Forever

Impact of Divorce on Adults

The Parents Forever classes helped me and my ex-husband in the ways that we can now communicate without arguing and screaming and calling each other names.... And I think it showed both of us a lot on how to control anger and how not to lash out at somebody.

The biggest influence was another woman in class. She was talking bad about her ex and my ex was doing the same thing to me. It helped me understand where my wife was getting ideas for revenge. The class addressed why people seek out revenge against their ex-spouse. I had a better understanding where my ex-spouse was coming from.

Impact of Divorce on Children

[U]nderstand also that the kids are going through just much as grief as you are and that you need to have...a lot of understanding for them for what they are going through. And...just really talk to them, and love them, and spend time with them, and still encourage them to see the other parent. Because their relationship is just as valuable with the other parent as it is with you, and you want to encourage that.

I think the biggest impact of the classes for me was on how I handle my kids, and how the divorce was impacting them. And I learned a lot about their feelings, and how I was putting them in the middle, by having them carry messages and asking them things. And it was really an eye opener to me to see examples of how I was doing that without even realizing it. And the videos especially reinforced everything that we learned in class, and just seeing the faces on those kids. I think all of the women in the group, we looked at each other and thought, "Oh, my gosh, I'm doing that!"

Legal Issues and Role of Mediation in Divorce

Options in regard to keeping a log of contact and what transpired so that when I met with the custody case person, I had an accurate recollection of things. I still keep the journal.

[T]hey...went over the mediation and having a person from outside come into your life and not being sure what this person is about and having the classes explained to you. [Realizing], hey this person is here to help you in your situation. Not just to help you but to help your children...help the other parent, and I thought it was really great. I needed to know what was happening, step-by-step...where I was heading.

Money Issues in Divorce

I thought that the discussion of the budgeting and financial changes that occur was an eye-opener, especially for those who had never done that before.

Pathways to a New Life

They explained the different feelings you are going through and that it is normal. Acknowledging that divorce is a hard thing to go through.

Course Format

Though interview questions focused on the course content, parents shared unsolicited information about the benefits and challenges of the course format (Figure 2). Five themes emerged. First, many parents were unhappy about being court mandated to attend Parents Forever. Second, some

parents were experiencing a part of the divorce process that came at an earlier or later part of the process than other participants. They felt they would have benefited more from a class specific to their needs. Third, many parents described the difficulties involved in attending the class due to transportation and timing issues. Fourth, parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with the group format. Many felt that being in a group helped normalize their family situation and allowed them to see different perspectives. And fifth, there were mixed reactions about the ability of facilitators to lead the class sessions and prevent their own experiences with divorce from affecting the group. Some parents complained of facilitators' inability to manage group dynamics, group conflict, and group members who monopolized group time.

Figure 2.

Quotes from Parents Describing the Course Format of Parents Forever

Timing in Divorce Process and Class Logistics
[T]he classes were after the fact for me. The divorce was already final, everything was already set in stone, and the class was more for people to get more information. It didn't help me at all.
I felt that they were more of an inconvenience. [It was] a good hour, more than an hour drive to where I live to where the classes were offered in order for me to complete the classes in a timely manner and per court order. I had to leave my children home and find a special sitter or somebody who could watch them while I was gone. So there was an added expense with mileage and day care for me to have to go to these classes.
Group Format and Role of Facilitators
And one thing that I found really interesting was that, there was another man in the group who sounded just the same as my spouse...as far as denial about volatile temperament and misuse of chemicals. And it helped me to try to understand his perspective and how those things weren't significant to him when it came to how his relationship was with his children. And though I know that there are serious problems that you need to address when somebody has those kinds of problems, I also recognized that my spouse did nurture the children as best as he could. And it was a positive influence, even if it wasn't a perfect influence.
The speakers didn't seem to have control over the situation, so it ended up being a complaint session.

Behavior Change

In addition to using their own words to describe Parents Forever, parents were also asked multiple-choice questions that focused on the four objectives of the program: eliminating parent conflict in front of the children; keeping the children out of the middle of parent issues; providing access to both parents; and putting the best interest of the children first. Many parents reported improvements in behaviors indicative of these objectives.

At the start of the program, 32.6% of parents used their children to carry messages, 38.2% put down the other parent in front of the children, and 27.0% quizzed the children about the other parent. After completing the program, 48.3% of the parents who had used their children to carry messages, 51.5% of parents who had put down the other parent in front of the children, and 8.3% of parents who had quizzed the children about the other parent reported engaging in these behaviors "less," and 20.7%, 36.4%, and 70.8% (respectively) reported engaging in these behaviors "not at all." Improvements in cooperation, communication, and emotional well-being were also reported (Table 2).

Table 2.

Percent of Parents Who Had "Gotten Better" at Putting the Best Interests of Their Children First

Behavior Change	Frequency	Sample Size

Cooperation with other parent	58.4%	78
Communication with kids	51.7%	88
Own emotional well-being	78.7%	88
Children's emotional well-being	58.4%	84

Last, parents were asked whether Parents Forever improved their ability to eliminate parent conflict in front of their children. Three-quarters of parents reported they had made changes in avoiding conflict with the other parent in front of the children, and 38.0% reported they had "gotten better" at managing conflict with the other parent. Nearly half of parents (42.5%) reported handling their anger with the other parent by talking it out. Further, 30.3% of parents reported increasing the amount of time the children spent with the other parent.

Awareness of Services

A final objective of Parents Forever is to increase parents' ability to access services in the community when they need them. Parents were asked if they were more aware of places that provide various types of assistance to divorcing parents as a result of Parents Forever (Table 3).

Table 3.
Awareness of Services After Completing Parents Forever

Service	Frequency (n=66)
Parenting classes	44.9%
School counselor	31.5%
Women's shelter	29.2%
Financial services	32.6%
Mental health provider	37.1%
Clergy	36.0%
Mediation	41.6%

Discussion

These evaluation data provide evidence that Parents Forever can improve parents' abilities to effectively cope with divorce as well as support their children through this process and thereby help mediate the impact of divorce on their children.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the results of the present evaluation were positive, there were four major limitations. First, these data are from a small sample of relatively homogenous adults. Future evaluations of divorce education should include larger samples and more complete demographic information, including race, income, and previous marriages, to explore which families may or may not benefit from this curriculum and in what ways. The response rate was also quite low. As such, these data are not generalizable to all divorcing parents. In the future, creative methods for tracking respondents should be considered to increase the response rate of this highly mobile population.

Second, it must be noted that all reported behavior change cannot be attributed to Parents Forever. In fact, some parents reported that their behavior change was *not* the result of what they learned in the program. Future research might consider the impact of (e.g., conversations with

other parents, utilizing mental health services, etc.) the range of activities parents participate in.

Third, it is not possible to suggest that behavior change is always beneficial. For example, increasing contact between an abusive parent and a child will not be in the best interest of that child.

And fourth, social desirability may have affected these results. Self-report data are limited, and it seems likely that parents may have responded the way they thought they were expected to or may have interpreted their behavior very differently than an outsider would have. Future research might gather data from children, both parents, and other family members or friends to help supplement parental self-reports.

Implications for Divorce Education Programming

1. Group facilitators must work to attend to the different needs of individuals at different stages of the divorce process. The divorce process can be quite lengthy, and parents attend divorce education at varying points in this process. Educational programs might be better developed with these varying needs in mind.
2. Many parents would have benefited from this information earlier in the divorce process. Lawyers and mediators might recommend parents enroll in divorce education, or perhaps strategies for adjusting the course content should be considered.
3. Special attention should be paid to course format. Class logistics such as location and time of day are critical to parent satisfaction.
4. More attention should be paid to training and supervising group facilitators. Effective management of group dynamics and the ability to provide unbiased education are critical to maintaining a high-quality and effective divorce education program.
5. More information should be given to parents about the impact of divorce on children. Parents wanted the opportunity to have their children participate in the program in some capacity.

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