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## Impacts of a Court Mandatory Parenting Program

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### Abstract

University of Missouri Outreach and Extension offered a court mandatory parenting program, Focus on Kids, in cooperation with two judicial circuits. The program reached 1,500 divorcing parents in two judicial circuits in 28 months. Overwhelmed parents felt that the program helped them be aware of their children's reactions to divorce and feelings, stress reduction, and time-sharing. Ninety-three percent of the participants felt the program was worthwhile. Suggestions on how Extension can implement a similar program and work with the court system are discussed.

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Divorce is a process that involves a series of changes. Parents need to know what to expect from their children and how to help them cope with changes over time. Parents can help reduce their children's risk of having emotional and behavioral problems by practical co-parenting and avoiding hostile exchanges (Johnston & Girdner, 1998; Frieman, Garon, & Garon, 2000).

In Missouri, legislators passed a law in August 1998 to mandate divorcing parents with minors under age 18 to attend a parenting program when they file for divorce. Focus on Kids is one of the programs required by local courts for divorcing parents with minors under age 18 to attend.

### Focus on Kids Program

Focus on Kids (FOK) is a 2-1/2 hour program to help divorcing parents learn about the effects of divorce on children and positive co-parenting skills. The program was designed by the Department of Human Development and Family Studies of University of Missouri and has been offered through the campus and field faculty of the University of Missouri Outreach and Extension. Focus on Kids facilitators with a master degree must complete FOK facilitator training from the University of Missouri in order to facilitate the FOK program. The FOK facilitator training includes reading, discussion, observation of on-site FOK classes, and co-teaching.

Focus on Kids was mandated by the 29<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuits in the southwest region of Missouri in September 1998. When parents file for a divorce, they receive a Focus on Kids program brochure and sign up for a class that is convenient for them. Divorcing parents must attend the class separately. After attending the entire workshop and filling out a program evaluation, parents receive FOK handouts, including the effect of divorce on children, children's reactions to divorce, co-parenting, communication skills, stress, a family law resource guide, and certification of completion. Parents need to present their certificate of completion to their court before their divorce can be finalized.

### Impacts of the Program

Between September 1998 and December 2000, 135 Focus on Kids classes were offered and reached 1,500 divorcing parents. Evaluation results show that the majority of parents strongly felt that they had more understanding about how children are affected by divorce (95.5%) and the benefits of working cooperatively with the other parent (94.2%). More than 92% of the parents felt that the program increased their understanding of needs and reactions of children at various ages to divorce, ways to work through conflicts about the children, and the importance of having a time-

sharing plan. They thought that the program gave them useful ideas about reducing stress for the children and rated the program as worthwhile (93%). About 89.2% of parents said they planned to make a stronger effort to work with their ex-spouse and that the program offered helpful suggestions about how to set up meaningful time for the children with each parent.

Very few parents (2%) did not like the court mandatory program, and half of them were glad to attend and learned more than what they expected. Of 1,500 parents, about 5% of them wished that they had the program before deciding to divorce or when they divorced the first time, and 2% of the parents suggested having a follow-up program or more sessions. A few parents (1%) were not sure if divorce was the right choice for them after the program.

A 1-year follow-up survey focused on the parents in the 29<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit and provides some indications about program impacts, although the return rate was low (12%). Nearly three-fourths of parents strongly agreed that their knowledge about children and divorce had increased. More than two-thirds of the parents were aware of their children's feelings and reactions to family changes, spent more quality time with their children, and had used at least one idea to reduce stress and set up meaningful time for their children with each parent. Although 60% of the parents had made a strong effort to work with their ex-spouse and read the program package after the class, less than half of them could get along or work cooperatively for the sake of their children.

Overall, Focus on Kids did show positive impacts on divorcing parents, in particular in the areas of understanding children's reactions to divorce, children's feelings, time-sharing, and stress reduction. How to work cooperatively and get along with each other are still barriers for some parents. While the majority of parents favor the program, a few parents with high conflict, abusive situations, or teenagers were not satisfied with the program. Because Focus on Kids is a one-time short program, there is not enough time to cover all the issues that divorcing parents encounter.

### **Implications for Extension**

When implementing Focus on Kids or a similar program for divorcing parents, careful planning is a key to a successful program. For instance, Extension staff should do research to find out divorce rates and what agencies offer parenting programs in local areas. This research can help them explore needs and resources in a community. After doing research, Extension staff could contact their circuit courts, family courts, or domestic relations services to share with them the need of parenting programs, what Extension can offer, and why Extension can help divorcing parents. It's a good idea to present a program proposal to family court staff or judges. When the court agrees to have or mandate a parenting program for divorcing parents, the court and Extension should sign a program contract.

Well-trained facilitators are critical to making a difference in program outcomes. Facilitators need to know how to handle difficult participants, have good facilitating skills and knowledge about the issues to help stimulate discussion, and avoid domination or put down. A court mandatory program needs to be friendly and acceptable.

Divorce is a complex issue. It's important to consider the needs of divorcing parents before deciding program format and content. For example, is it necessary to offer different programs, such as programs for high conflict parents or parents of different age children or programs on anger, stress, divorce process, grief, conflict resolution, visitation, child support, or legal issues, etc.? Is a one-time or a series program helpful in a community? If a series program is chosen, based on topics, Extension can partner with local agencies to offer the program. A series program usually works better than a one-time program and makes more impact on participants' learning. If it is impossible to offer a series program, a variety of resources and referrals should be included in participants' packages for parents to reference.

Program evaluation is a critical piece to measure the impact of outcomes. When planning a program for divorcing parents, outcome measurements should be included, piloted, and revised. Are pre-and post-tests better than comparison groups? Is a program evaluation enough? If a follow-up evaluation is needed, what approach could be used to get good representation of class participants for data analysis?

Finally, working with a judicial circuit in an effective way can help the program run smoothly. A clear and concise proposal or program plan can help courts understand the purpose of the program and ensure better communication and understanding between courts and Extension. Implementing a court mandatory program is challenging but rewarding. Extension can not only reach more non-traditional clientele, but also learn more from various people about their real issues and problems, and about how Extension can effectively respond to their needs.

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