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Programs for Children of Separating Parents: Literature Review and Directions for Future Research

Program interventions for children whose parents are divorcing or separating seek to improve children's adjustment to their families' changed situations and to avert some of the long-term deleterious consequences of poor adjustment. A critical review of 14 published evaluations is summarized in a research series published by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). That review, *Research Update—Programs for Children of Separating Parents: Literature Review and Directions for Future Research*, is now available from the AOC at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/.

Children's Programs

Program interventions for children whose parents are divorcing or separating seek to improve children's adjustment to divorce by working with them directly in a group setting, encouraging children to share their feelings, dispelling myths about divorce, normalizing the experience, and imparting coping skills. Some programs also contain a parent-education component, which tries to discourage conflict between parents and maintain the parents' focus on their children's best interests and needs during the transition. Most are preventive programs, meaning that they tend to accept all children, regardless of whether there is an observed need for intervention.

Children's intervention programs are similar in their goals, content, and structure. Programs aim to clarify misconceptions about divorce, normalize the divorce experience by encouraging group peers to share feelings (such as anger and confusion) and experiences, dispel unrealistic beliefs (such as guilt or reunification fantasies), and teach problem-solving skills so that children can negotiate changed and possibly trying circumstances, such as conflict between parents, absence of noncustodial parents, and agitated or neglectful custodial parents. Nearly every intervention reported a variety of pedagogical methods, such as presentations, reading, role-playing, discussion, homework, and group projects.

Evaluations

Even though there are more than 100 court-connected programs for children, no published evaluations of programs that take referrals from courts were found (most were school-based).

Program evaluations largely shared research designs and analysis strategies. All are pre- and post comparisons of at least one treatment group and some type of control group (in the latter, treatment was usually delayed). Study sizes (of treatment and control groups, combined) ranged from 11 to 280 children (or mother-child pairs). The median study size was 82. Evaluators usually administered a large number of inventories to children and up to three adult informants both before and after program intervention.

Findings

Evaluations of children's intervention programs are generally consistent in their findings. Most examined program effects on children's adjustment (in such dimensions as anger, sadness, and acceptance) to the divorce or separation. Nearly all of the studies did find positive improvements, and those with follow-up measures found that the improvements were sustained. Self-perceptions and feelings were examined as were inventories measuring overall adjustment. Evaluations also found positive effects on other important dimensions such as overall adjustment and school behavior, although the lack of uniformity in the measures weaken those effects. Two programs that involved interventions for the custodial mother did not show better outcomes than those same programs when they excluded the mother (note: no programs involved fathers or noncustodial parents).

Implications for Court-Based Children's Programs

Research analyzing one large sample randomly distributed into treatment and control groups can overcome many of the methodological shortcomings of the existing research. Small samples and nonrandom assignment lead to findings that are tentative and explanations that are too simple; they also reduce the ability to know that results are not due to statistical aberration. Ethical issues surrounding control groups can be overcome by delaying (rather than withholding) that group's treatment or by other established techniques.

- Some of the deleterious effects of parental separation are observable in the short term, but most others are indirect and emerge over time. Only the most well-funded and long-term studies can capture subtler effects. Evaluations should search for program effects that are the most appropriate to their study designs and resources. For example, long-term and indirect effects include lowered court costs and increases in children's school attainment and the quality of their marital relationships as adults. It is probably unrealistic to search for these types of effects in one study.
- Researchers who help programs articulate a theory of their particular intervention effects can effectively create a design and measures that capture that theory. Sharply drawn hypotheses help evaluations focus on the most important outcomes.
- Realistic expectations for program effectiveness can be enhanced by accounting for the populations served. Programs that accept referrals from the courts are probably more likely to have clients who are in visible need of intervention than preventive programs. One can reasonably expect a larger overall magnitude of improvements in an in-need population than in a mixed one. Because there is no guidance in the literature about in-need populations and certain co-occurrences (such as domestic violence and custody or support disputes), however, it is important to measure these factors to look for differential effects.

Programs that improve children's divorce adjustment (along the dimensions of anger, separation anxiety, and confusion) ought to consider themselves successful. Alleviating ongoing suffering is an important program goal that too often can be minimized in the face of loftier program goals and study hypotheses.

Because of the preponderance of positive program effects, however modest, it is expected that comparable court-based programs will show positive effects as well.

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