



April 2004

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

*Abstract: Programs that help children when their parents separate or divorce seek to improve children's adjustment to their families' changed situations by working with them directly in a group setting, encouraging them to share feelings, dispelling myths about divorce, normalizing the experience, and teaching coping skills. A small body of scientific research on the effectiveness of these programs is reviewed and found to show modest but consistently positive effects on children's adjustment to the family transition. As none of these evaluations are of court-based programs, and as all these programs can all be considered preventive and accept clients regardless of demonstrated need, the ability to generalize these findings to court-based programs is limited. However, a critical review of the substantive findings and methodological features of these studies does provide direction for future research in court-based programs for children.*

### Introduction

Program interventions that help children when their parents separate or divorce seek to improve children's adjustment to their families' changed situations by working with them directly in a group setting, encouraging them to share feelings, dispelling myths about divorce, normalizing the experience, and teaching coping skills.<sup>1</sup> Some programs also include a parent education component that tries to discourage conflict between parents and maintain the parents' focus on their children's best interest and needs during the transition. The programs also work to have long-term impact on children's mental health and social adjustment since poor adjustment to divorce is associated with later problems in these areas. These programs are sometimes called prevention programs because they aim to intervene in families before children have shown psychological signs of poor family transition, although such programs typically accept all clients regardless of when the separation occurred. It is impossible to estimate the number of such programs in the United States because they are offered by a mix of private and nonprofit organizations in a variety of settings, including schools and community centers. The courts refer or order families to what is likely a very small percentage of the programs in operation. A 1999 national survey of family courts found that the courts use 152 programs around the country (Geelhoed, Blaisure, and Geasler, 2001).

---

<sup>1</sup> Other critical reviewers (see masthead) are gratefully acknowledged: Claire Barnes, Jeffrey Cookston, Sharon Kalemkarian, Joan B. Kelly, Susanna Marshland and Alison Neustrom.

Published, formal evaluations are available for a handful of these programs. This report summarizes these evaluations and critically assesses the state of our knowledge about the programs' effectiveness.

## **Overview of Research on Divorce's Effects on Children**

The question of long-term effect of divorce on children is a complicated one and has been met with increasingly sophisticated and nuanced research (Kelly and Emery, 2003). Some generalities can be made from this body of work, even while the abbreviated treatment that follows necessarily omits many details.

Most adult children of divorced parents are statistically indistinguishable from adult children of continuously married parents in measures of economic success (e.g., salary), social success (e.g., education and friendship networks), and psychological adjustment. Moreover, some amount of the adult differences can be attributed to differences that existed prior to the divorce (so-called predisruption effects), and only some of those differences may have been caused by predivorce strife. Socioeconomic differences are one such factor: poorer parents are more likely to go through divorce than wealthier families, and their children are likely to have lower educational and occupational attainment than the children of wealthier parents. Prospective studies of divorce have found that families that would eventually experience divorce had more parenting problems—including inattention to educational development, severe and unresolved conflict among parents, mental health issues, and sons with behavioral problems—than families that would never experience divorce, even long before the parental split (Cherlin, Chase-Landsdale, and McRae, 1998; Sun and Li, 2002).

Sociodemographic literature, which tends to rely on large, nationally representative surveys, finds that the effects of divorce on child outcomes are tied directly to the diminished economic resources of the household in which the child is raised and indirectly to the instability it creates. The negative effects are similar to those seen for children raised by single parents, namely lower educational and occupational attainment as well as lower marriage rates (e.g., McLanahan and Sandfeur, 1994). Sociodemographic studies generally yield only limited information about divorce's impact on intervening psychological variables; rather, they infer psychological states from behavior measures, such as marriage rates.

The psychological literature tends to focus on changed family relations and on children's reactions to those changes. Poor adjustment to divorce on the part of the parents can lead to deterioration in parenting and family relations. Some dimensions of poor parenting and family relations include inconsistent discipline, conflict between parents, poor paternal bonding, and triangulation of children (that is, when one parent attempts to turn the children against the other parent). The long-term negative effects observable in the deeper and more focused, but usually smaller-scale, psychological studies include anger, externalizing behavioral problems, stress, anxiety, diminished marital quality, academic failure, and poorer physical and mental health (Amato and Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001).

Both types of analyses show that some children endure strong, long-term effects of divorce in the economic, social, and psychological dimensions of their lives. For some, the effects can be severe and the need for proper responses from a variety of people and social institutions is high.

The analysis of the short-term effects of divorce is less complicated. During and in the period immediately following parental separation, children can experience shock, disbelief, and confusion (even if some relief is also brought on by the separation, such as may be the case in high-conflict families). Children must also learn, sometimes in an environment of diminished parenting (as parents struggle with their own adjustment) to negotiate their changed relationships with parents, possibly new partners and stepsiblings, and surroundings (as separation is often the occasion for moving and changing schools). Good parenting can buffer some of the trauma of the separation (and the behavioral problems that may follow); nonetheless, most children will experience some or most of these feelings.

## **California Context**

Many social interventions offered to families in transition try to improve long-term adjustment for children by altering the traumatic aspects of postseparation life.<sup>2</sup> Child-support enforcement seeks to weaken the link between parental separation and its often deleterious effects on the family's financial well-being. Child custody mediation and parent education try to reduce the conflict that can lead parents to involve children in their disputes or obstruct children's regular contact with their noncustodial parents, and thereby avoid the psychological distress sometimes resulting. California, by law and public policy, has supported social interventions that try to lessen poor child outcomes by targeting those intervening factors that are empirically supported.

In its 2001–2002 session, the California Legislature considered Assembly Bill 2263, which would have partially supported the Judicial Council's program evaluation of Kids' Turn, a program designed to assist children as their parents separate. The private, nonprofit Kids' Turn organization operates the program in six counties; licensees operate it in five others. The bill passed both houses, but was vetoed by Governor Gray Davis in fall 2002 because the Judicial Council "was not well suited to conduct this type of evaluation."<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, the Center for Families, Children & the Courts (CFCC) of the Administrative Office of the Courts AOC compiled this review of published evaluations of intervention programs for children of divorced or separated parents. This review is part of a series of reports published by the AOC on court-related programs funded by the federal Child Access to Visitation Grant;<sup>4</sup> prior reviews focused on parental education and supervised visitation (Haertel, 2002; Bruns and Ludlam, 2000). By supporting these literature reviews the AOC assists Child Access to Visitation Grant recipients and partially fulfills its legislative mandate to support the delivery of family court services by providing staff with essential, current information on family intervention programs.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Relatively few state-sponsored interventions seek to prevent divorces from occurring.

<sup>3</sup> Governor's veto message to Assem. on AB 2263 (Sept. 29, 2002), 2001–2002 Regular Session.

<sup>4</sup> The grant, administered by the CFCC since 1997, facilitates noncustodial parents' access to and visitation with their children. Programs in 37 counties have used its funds to support a combination of programs, including parent education, supervised visitation, and group counseling programs, such as Kids' Turn (Judicial Council of California, 2002, page 10).

<sup>5</sup> Under Family Code sections 1850–1852, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services (now part of the CFCC) is mandated to (1) assist counties in implementing mediation and conciliation proceedings; (2) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (3) administer a program for the training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting system; and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current family law for the purpose of shaping future policy.

## Published Evaluations of Children’s Programs Included in This Review

Keyword searches in electronic databases generated the pool of articles for this review; additional sources were found in bibliographies.<sup>6</sup> Following Lee, Picard, and Blain (1994), we used the following initial criteria in selecting programs: (1) the programs worked directly with children whose parents were divorced or separating; (2) the evaluations had a comparative design that included both a treatment group and some manner of control group; and (3) the evaluations used pre- and postintervention measures. Most evaluations from the pool met the minimum criteria for inclusion. Given the pragmatic intentions of this review, only more recent evaluations—published between 1985 and 2002—were considered. This search generated 14 articles. The reference section lists the articles, and the appendix provides summaries of the evaluations. Almost every evaluation is of a school-based program; none dealt with court-based programs.

## The Intervention Programs and Their Evaluations

The children’s intervention programs reviewed here are similar in their goals, content, and structure. These programs seek to improve children’s adjustment to divorce or separation and to have an impact on long-term mental health and the behavioral problems associated with poor adjustment. The programs aim to clarify misconceptions about divorce, normalize the divorce experience by encouraging members of the group to share their feelings 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, the absence of noncustodial parents, and agitated or neglectful custodial parents.

Nearly every intervention program reported a variety of educational methods, such as presentations, reading, role playing, discussion, homework, and group projects. School-based programs are usually one semester long (10–14 weeks), while the other programs reviewed spanned from 6 to 16 weeks. Total class time ranged from 9 to 19 hours. Programs targeted preschool-aged children and children ages 5–19; 9–12-year-old participants were most common. Group sizes ranged from 6 to 12 participants. Groups were often co-led, sometimes by leaders differing in gender and/or professional background. Three evaluations are of programs that intervened with both children and parents.

Program evaluation research designs and analysis strategies are also similar. All are pretreatment and posttreatment comparisons of at least one treatment group and some type of control group (in the latter, treatment was usually delayed).<sup>7</sup> 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

---

<sup>6</sup> PsychINFO, INFOTRAC, and First Search were searched in May 2003 with the key phrases *divorce therapy*, *divorce intervention*, *divorce and social support*, and *children of divorced parents*.

<sup>7</sup> This design is one in which both treatment-group and control-group subjects are measured immediately before the treatment group begins the intervention and immediately after its completion. Thus, the treatment group has experienced the passage of time as well as the intervention, while the control group has only experienced the passage of time. Some studies repeat posttreatment measures at one or more follow-up intervals to test whether treatment effects emerge or dissipate over time. Out of ethical consideration, the control group may be given treatment at a future date. Their second measurement is “post” for the purpose of the evaluation—that is, both pre- and posttreatment measures are taken before the control group has itself received treatment.

administered a large number of Likert-scale inventories<sup>8</sup> to children and up to three adult informants at pre- and posttreatment. The surveys were usually converted to additive scales. Most analyses were multivariate analyses of variance of additive scales, with time and treatment group as control variables. The New Beginnings program (Wolchik et al., 2000) design also included coded observations of mother-child interactions. Analyses were conducted on samples that were either homogeneous in family, social class, and demographic measures or else did not account for variability along these dimensions. In most cases, the homogeneity of the groups was a product of neighborhood homogeneity, as most programs were located in neighborhood schools. People who designed or ran the programs under investigation wrote most of the articles. All parents and almost all other adults who completed questionnaires about the children at pre- and posttreatment knew that the children had participated in the intervention. (See the table for a summary of common program features.)

Some of the 14 articles reviewed here study the same program (see the references section and the appendix). Notably, five articles evaluated the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP). That program has been run in schools in the Rochester, New York, area for many years, and its syllabus has been customized for different populations—the evaluations examine several renditions of CODIP. Two versions of the Divorce Adjustment Project (DAP) are reviewed as well: one child-only program and one joint program for children and their custodial mothers. Two articles that evaluate the

Summary of Program Characteristics
Size of study: 11-280 (median = 82)
Duration: 6-16 weeks; 9-19 hours
Typical group size: under 10
Typical age range of children: 9-12 years
Institutional affiliation: school (10), community (4)
Study size: 11-280

mother-child program, New Beginnings from Maricopa County, Arizona, are also discussed. The CODIP studies are compelling because of their replication over many years. The DAP studies have follow-up analyses. The New Beginnings project seems particularly well executed and the analysis thoughtfully done. Evaluations of children’s intervention programs are generally consistent in their findings. Most of them (the New Beginnings evaluations being an exception) examined program effects on aspects of children’s adjustment—self-blame, sadness, or acceptance—to the divorce or separation. Nearly every one of the studies did find such improvements, and those with follow-up measures found that the improvements were sustained. Self-perceptions and measures of feelings (such as the Strait-Trait Anxiety Inventory) were examined as were inventories measuring overall adjustment. While the CODIP studies attributed program success to significant group differences in pre- and posttreatment tests along these dimensions, other studies did so less consistently. (There may be differences in the quality of the instruments used.) There is no evidence for an association between treatment length and intensity, on the one hand, and program outcomes, on the other.<sup>9</sup> The two programs that involved interventions for custodial mothers did not show better outcomes as compared to those same programs when they excluded mothers.

<sup>8</sup> Likert scales are multiple-choice responses that are ordered, such as levels of agreement with the survey item “I am sad right now.”

<sup>9</sup> The lack of association between program length and outcomes may be because most programs were of sufficient duration to have an effect. Some court-connected programs are much shorter than the minimum found in this set of reviewed studies, and thus a comparable analysis of court-connected program evaluations may have led to a different conclusion, were there a set of such evaluations.

## **Critique**

Four features of the programs and their clients limit the usefulness of this review for court-based programs. Foremost, none of the evaluations are of court-based programs—indeed, almost all the programs are school-based. Second, most programs recruited children whose parents were divorced or married but separated; only two included children whose parents never married. Programs that receive clients based on family court orders are quite likely to work with children whose parents never married and with a small number whose parents never cohabitated. Third, court-ordered families are more likely to be in observable need of the intervention program, while the programs reviewed are largely prevention programs that accept most children, regardless of observed need. Finally, court-based programs in California work with children and parents (Kids' Turn simultaneously conducts groups for mothers, fathers, and children within narrow age categories). Most published evaluations are of children-only programs; the two exceptions work only with custodial mothers.

Other limitations are methodological in nature. Nonrandom assignment, small study sizes, and misalignment between program goals and outcome measures are such shortcomings. Analyses cannot assume, based on pretreatment similarities, that nonrandom assignment did not compromise the data because so little baseline data are collected for testing. Small study sizes preclude using even rudimentary controls and compromise the confidence in simple bivariate and multivariate analyses. These interventions are geared toward providing emotional relief, dispelling divorce myths, encouraging cognitive reframing, and providing lessons in coping and problem solving. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize treatment effects for adjustment to divorce and perhaps even externalizing behaviors, frustration, and depression. However, many of the evaluations also tested for weakly related behaviors, such as school performance, and largely found no effects. Prevention programs are best assessed using posttreatment measures that are taken months or years after the end of treatment (Emery, Kitzmann, and Waldron, 1999, pp. 323–344). Finally, the evaluations do not directly measure the changes in hypothesized mediator effects (for example, the number of divorce myths held before and after the intervention), making causal attribution more difficult (Grych and Fincham, 1992).

The better studies reviewed here share some of the following characteristics: replication,<sup>10</sup> larger sample sizes, random assignment, well-defined controls, and clear linkages between program theory, interventions, and outcome measures. These studies also strengthen their claims by presenting information about syllabuses, trainer training and supervision, and statistical checks of measurement instruments. Program evaluations are reviewed in detail in the appendix. Multiple evaluations of the same program are considered together as a collective evaluation.

## **Recommendations for Future Inquiry**

### **Research Design and Measurement**

Most studies reviewed here have small sample sizes, thereby precluding the use of many or, sometimes, any control variables. The confidence with which one can assert that findings are significant is reduced as well. Random assignment and matched samples help offset these problems,

---

<sup>10</sup> *Replication* means that the program was evaluated on multiple occasions.

but when samples are sufficiently small findings become tentative or implausible and explanations too simple. Many methodological issues in quasi-experimental data, and surveys more generally, can be minimized when the design includes one large sample randomly distributed into the treatment and control groups.

Where possible, evaluation resources would be better spent on gathering larger samples than multiple measures. Multiple measures take two forms in the studies reviewed. First, multiple dimensions related to the hypothesis are measured, such as depression, adjustment to divorce, and school achievement. Second, multiple informants are requested to participate in the study. In the case of school-based programs, this means pre- and posttreatment measures from program participants and their parents, teachers, and group leaders on a variety of dimensions.

Multiple measures add plausibility to research findings because imperfections or biases in any one measure are compensated for with analyses of other measures. However, using an inappropriate informant (or rater) for a measure introduces needless complications. In the case of multiple raters, teachers may be better able to judge school behavior; participants may be best able to assess their own self-blame over the parental split; and parents may be best able to judge their children's depression. When some informants are clearly better than others, there is little utility in gathering measures from poor ones. In the case of multiple dimensions, researchers can use those measures to judge which dimensions are most helped by the program. Thus, when one is choosing dimensions, it is better to emphasize those that the program can directly affect than it is to study outcomes that can be affected by many other experiences, unless other design strengths compensate for difficulties presented by studying very indirect effects.

Analytic problems introduced by multiple measures can weaken an analysis. Weak measures of association necessarily lower the average of the bundle of measures in a study (see Lee et al., 1994). Far worse is dismissing the weaker measures post hoc, because doing so adds arbitrariness to the analyst's judgments. Finally, analyzing large numbers of variables with a small sample violates standards that protect against the possibility that the research findings are a result of a statistical aberration. Multiple measures can be used to good effect, to be sure, and are often necessary in the real world of research to strengthen an analysis that is exploratory or based on a compromised research design. The problem is a matter of degree. At the far end are studies that assert the plausibility of their research findings but offer a preponderance of poor measures on a too-small sample. The use of a strong theoretical framework can work against these tendencies.

### **Research Design and Program Theory**

A theory of change or program effectiveness underlies most programs. Better evaluations incorporate theory into their research designs. Among other benefits, the incorporation of the theoretical orientation guards against testing for inappropriate outcomes.

Reviewed programs share, to some degree, the following theories. Many children whose parents are separating experience changes in their lives. Dimensions of change typically include one parent's move from the home, a change in residence for the custodial parent and child, a change in school, changes in daily routine, and parenting by adults who are experiencing some measure of stress.

Those changes can cause feelings of confusion, anger, alienation, and self-blame, which can in turn cause behavioral problems: internalization, externalization, refusal to see the noncustodial parent, diminished school performance. Intervention programs help in several ways. They reduce confusion by teaching facts about divorce, reduce alienation by providing a shared experience among participants in a group setting, and reduce the anxiety that change causes by giving children tools to accept the change and to negotiate changed circumstances and relationships. These effects may, in turn, minimize behavioral problems caused by difficulties resulting from the family transition that the children manifest at the time they join the program.

Evaluators should consider these hypotheses in terms of the pool of program participants in the study. The foremost point to keep in mind is that prevention programs accept participants regardless of their need for intervention or change—programs that work differently than those reviewed here should expect different treatment effects. Second, the reviewed programs accept children regardless of the timing of the separations, thereby also influencing measures of program effectiveness.

Prevention programs do not screen for a child's need for intervention because they hope to prevent difficulties that have yet to occur. Thus, prevention programs treat children who have no adjustment difficulties or subclinical adjustment difficulties; children whose short-term difficulties will self-correct over time; and children who may do worse before they improve, for reasons to do with the timing of the parental split rather than negative program effects (Lee et al., 1994). Only some participants are exhibiting measurable behavioral problems or poor academic performance, and only a subset of those problems can be attributed to the family transition. There is a great deal of diversity in both adjustment to divorce, on the one hand, and the relationship between adjustment and behavioral manifestations, on the other.<sup>11</sup> The only studies that looked at this question with any degree of sophistication were the New Beginnings evaluations. For example, the first evaluation (Wolchik et al., 2000) showed that the mother's participation in the program improved the quality of the mother-child relationship for those pairs who had particularly poor communication at the start of program intervention.

Many programs had a mix of students whose parents had newly separated and students whose parents may have been separated or divorced for more than three years. Yet there seems to be a relationship (and a complicated one at that) between time and adjustment to divorce. For instance, some research has suggested that adjustment difficulties can reemerge in adolescence, particularly when that developmental stage corresponds with the introduction of a stepparent (see Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). Treatment received during childhood may indeed suppress adolescent factors that give rise to secondary adjustment difficulties. Findings of long-term effects by Wolchik et al. (2002) suggest that this may be the case. Almost no evaluations attempted to statistically control for time since separation of the parents. Realistically, only the most well supported research evaluations will be able to discern such effects.

---

<sup>11</sup> In-depth longitudinal research confirms this as well (for example, Hetherington and Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, Blakeslee, and Lewis, 2001).

Timing effects may complicate matters in the other direction as well. Long-term effects of pre-separation difficulties may not manifest entirely at pretreatment but may emerge naturally at posttreatment, thus dampening positive treatment effects. It is important to use control groups in research evaluations, but measuring and statistically accounting for time since family disruption would probably strengthen observed treatment effects. In the future, evaluations should control for the nonlinear effects of both time since separation and the measured need for program intervention.

### **Legal Context and Court Services**

Direct intervention with children is only one of many interventions that support families in California. Custody mediation, child-support enforcement, interventions to improve divorce transitions for parents, access and visitation programs, and, sometimes, child protective services work together to strengthen families as their postseparation family patterns take hold. Court-based programs (as opposed to school-based programs) should seriously assess the feasibility of accounting for other interventions in the family, apart from direct therapeutic intervention with children.

The legal context of the separation, including whether clients have been self-referred or court-ordered, is a closely related factor that also should be accounted for in the research. Disputes over custody and other issues of families of a lower socioeconomic class and those with multiple problems are more likely to come before the court for resolution than are the disputes of families of a higher socioeconomic class and those with fewer problems because the latter groups have the resources to resolve their disputes privately. In addition, the courts and social service providers are particularly interested in so-called high-conflict families (many of which are marked by domestic violence or other antagonisms) in part because they take up a lot of court resources. It is important to know whether the traditional curricula developed for preventive treatment serve such families. In studies where measuring family problems and resources is not possible, referral sources and legal contexts may be important proxy measures.

### **Cost-Benefit Analyses**

The state has an enduring interest in securing healthy home environments for children and regularly assesses the value of one type of social intervention over another to assist in this goal. Children's welfare is undoubtedly a major consideration in program-funding decisions. However, there are others. The cost of such programs, vis-à-vis their direct benefits to court operations, is an important factor in determining the desirability of a program. Yet measures of court savings are notoriously difficult to conceptualize and measure. Indeed, none of the program evaluations reviewed here attempted to look at the program's impact on the usage of other court resources, such as repeated custody mediations, litigation, and child-support enforcement. Such an evaluation would require an enormous amount of information that is not currently gathered and a sophisticated model of resource utilization that the court system does not yet have. Programs would have to understand who is being referred to their programs in order to know whether they are receiving clients who would otherwise tax the system disproportionately or, conversely, clients who are already well equipped to settle their affairs without court help. Because children's intervention programs in California are not mandatory, there are undoubtedly large differences in the characteristics of children who enroll in these programs and those who do not. Program evaluations are silent on the question whether interventions reduce posttreatment usage of court resources, much less whether pretreatment legal issues affect court costs differentially.

Thus, this literature does not offer guidance for designing a program evaluation that would include measures relating to courts.

Any program evaluation that shows positive results along the dimensions of conflict between parents, child depression, and child externalization problems can tentatively be assumed to create savings to the state as a whole, if not to the family court. Certainly, the school system expends resources confronting the difficult behavior of children, and mental health services assist people with psychological and behavioral problems. Posttreatment reductions in these areas may indeed translate into reduced use of mental health services, thus working against the overall observed statistic in the United States regarding the higher usage of such services among grown children of divorce. Realized savings most likely will be diffuse across governmental agencies and over the life of the individual.

### **A Note on Parent-Child Programs**

Three evaluations (Wolchik et al., 2000; Wolchik et al., 2002; and Stolberg and Garrison, 1985) tested whether children's postintervention scores could be further boosted by their parents' participation in an adult intervention program. The logic behind dual programs is that the parents' difficulties (with their own transition and with appropriately responding to their children's needs) can exacerbate or, indeed, be the major cause of their children's difficulties in adjusting to divorce. However, these studies found no added benefit of a combined program. Moreover, the New Beginnings studies found that increased contact between the father and children did not result from an improved maternal attitude toward father-child contact.

There are two unusual features of these dual programs that may set them apart from California's Kids' Turn program. First, they assisted only custodial mothers. Noncustodial parents received no services, and custodial fathers were not included in the studies. Second, New Beginnings excluded clients who may have had custody conflicts. Restricting the sample to only mothers with highly stable custody arrangements probably increased the prevalence of father absence, which may have, in turn, made father-child contact in the sample less likely to be affected by improved maternal attitude.

### **Family Context and Predisruption Effects**

The few evaluations that controlled for predisruption effects did so by restricting their samples to relatively better adjusted families (for example, families that had never used mental health services). Yet some analyses showed that posttreatment improvements were greater for children who had relatively poorer initial adjustment to divorce (see Stolberg and Mahler, 1994; Wolchik et al., 2000). The restriction of study samples to relatively better adjusted families may have led to an underestimation of positive treatment effects. The implication is that programs may be more successful than these findings suggest they are.

The reviewed literature does not tell us about the impact of preexisting family problems on children's adjustment to divorce. Program directors and evaluators should be concerned whether programs are relevant and helpful to children whose parents have been domestically violent, children who have been abused or neglected, or children whose parents have undergone other profound traumas. Researchers in California should also ask whether families with limited English-language skills are being referred to nonmandatory intervention programs and whether the programs help them as well.

## Conclusion

Many evaluations found that immediately after children complete the intervention they are better adjusted to the transition and have some new skills to confront the challenges they face. Others find enduring positive effects at different follow-up periods. The findings are modest but consistent.

Many of the limitations of the evaluation research in this field are methodological. Others have to do with the foreseeable lack of comparability of the evaluated programs (largely school-based) with programs that accept court-ordered referrals. Programs that improve children's adjustment to divorce or separation (along the dimensions of anger, externalization, self-blame, separation anxiety, confusion, parent blame, and unrealistic fantasies about reunification) ought to consider themselves successful. This is true even when program evaluations do not find improvements in measures like school performance or other kinds of competence. Alleviating short-term distress is an important program goal that can too often 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 programs that are court-based would be shown to have positive effects as well.

## References

(Evaluations are noted with an asterisk.)

- \* Alpert-Gillis, L. J., Pedro-Carroll, J. L., and Cowen, E. L. (1989). The Children of Divorce Intervention Program: Development, implementation, and evaluations of a program for young urban children. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57(5), 585–589.
- Amato, P. R. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15(3), 355–370.
- Amato, P. R., and Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110(1), 26–46.
- \* Bornstein, M. T., Bornstein, P. H., and Walter, H. A. (1988). Children of divorce: Empirical evaluation of a group-treatment program. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 17(3), 248–254.
- Bruns, C., and Ludlam, J. G. (2000). *Research update: Supervised visitation: A look at the research literature*. San Francisco: Administrative Office of the Courts.
- Cherlin, A. J., Lindsay Chase-Landsdale, P., and McRae, C. (1998). Effects of parental divorce on mental health throughout the life course. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 239–249.
- \* Crosbie-Burnett, M., and Newcomer, L. L. (1990). Group counseling children of divorce: The effects of a multimodal intervention. *Journal of Divorce*, 13, 69–78.
- Emery, R. E., Kitzmann, K. M., and Waldron, M. (1999). Psychological interventions for separated and divorced families. In M. E. Hetherington (Ed.), *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Geelhoed, R. J., Blaisure, K. R., and Geasler, M. J. (2001). Status of court-connected programs for children whose parents are separating or divorcing. *Family Court Review*, 39(4), 393–404.

- Grych, J. H., and Fincham, F. D. (1992). Interventions for children of divorce: Toward greater integration of research and action. *Psychological Bulletin*, 11(3), 434–454.
- \* Gwynn, C. A., and Brantley, H. T. (1987). Effects of a divorce group intervention for elementary school children. *Psychology in the Schools*, 24, 161–164.
- Haertel, G. (2002). *Critical review of the evaluations of court-based parent education programs*. San Francisco: Administrative Office of the Courts.
- Hetherington, M. E., and Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Judicial Council of California (2002). *California's Access to Visitation grant program for enhancing responsibility and opportunity for nonresidential parents: The first five years: Report to the Legislature*. San Francisco: Judicial Council of California.
- Kelly, J. B., and Emery, R. E. (2003). Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations*, 52, 352–362.
- Lee, C. M., Picard, M., and Blain, M. D. (1994). A methodological and substantive review of intervention outcome studies for families undergoing divorce. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 8(1), 3–15.
- McLanahan, S. S., with Sandfeur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- \* Pedro-Carroll, J. L. and Alpert-Gillis, L. J. (1997). Preventive interventions for children of divorce: A developmental model for 5 and 6 year old children. *Journal of Primary Intervention*, 18, 5–23.
- \* Pedro-Carroll, J. L., and Cowen, E. L. (1985). The Children of Divorce Intervention Program: An investigation of the efficacy of a school-based prevention program. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 53(5), 603–611.
- \* Pedro-Carroll, J. L., Cowen, E. L., Hightower, A. D., and Guare, J. C. (1986). Preventive intervention with latency-aged children of divorce: A replication study. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(3), 277–290.
- \* Pedro-Carroll, J. L., Sutton, S. E., and Wyman, P. A. (1999). A two-year follow-up evaluation of a preventive intervention for young children of divorce. *School Psychology Review*, 28(3), 467–476.
- \* Roseby, V., and Deutsch, R. (1985). Children of separation and divorce: Effects of a social role-taking group intervention on fourth and fifth graders. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 14(1), 55–60.
- \* Stolberg, A. L., and Garrison, K. M. (1985). Evaluating a primary prevention program for children of divorce. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 13(2), 111–124.
- \* Stolberg, A. L., and Mahler, J. (1994). Enhancing treatment gains in a school-based intervention for children of divorce through skill training, parental involvement, and transfer procedures. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 62(1), 147–156.

Sun, Y., and Li, Y. (2002). Children's well-being during parents' marital disruption process: A pooled time-series analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 64(2), 472–488.

Wallerstein, J. S., Blakeslee, S., and Lewis, J. M. (2001). *Divorce: The 25 year landmark study*. New York: Hyperion Press.

- \* Wolchik, S. A., Sandler, I. N., Millsap, R. E., Plummer, B. A., Greene, S. M., Anderson, E. R., Dawson-McClure Spring, R., Hipke, K., and Haine, R. (2002). Six-year follow-up of preventive interventions for children of divorce: Randomized controlled trial. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 288(15), 1874–1881.

## **Appendix: Summary of Evaluations**

Bornstein, Bornstein, and Walter (1988). A six-week group therapy program co-led by mixed-sex therapists, for children 7–14 whose parents had been recently separated. The syllabus covers identification of feelings; communication, anger management, and problem-solving skills; and divorce facts. Thirty-one volunteer participants were randomly distributed into treatment, delayed-treatment, and control groups. There were no pre- or posttreatment changes in children's measures of anxiety, attitudes towards separation, paternal blame, feelings of abandonment, self-concept, and other measures. Teachers reported significant reductions in children's problem behaviors. Parents and children reported satisfaction with the program.

Crosbie-Burnett and Newcomer (1990). This evaluation of a school-based program for sixth-grade students used a very small sample: 11 students were randomly assigned to treatment and delayed treatment. At postintervention, treatment-group children had greater improvements in postdivorce adjustment, better school adjustment, and less depression than the control group.

Gwynn and Brantley (1987). A school-based, eight-week program for fourth- and fifth-grade North Carolina schools that teaches divorce facts and problem-solving skills and encourages expression of feelings. Five treatment groups of five to six children were compared to five like-sized control groups matched for gender and time since separation. Program aims and study hypotheses included decreased depression and anxiety, increased information about divorce, and decreased negative feelings about divorce. Pre- and posttreatment changes showed improvements in, and follow-up analysis showed maintenance of, scores on inventories measuring depression, anxiety, and knowledge and feelings about divorce. Comparably little information about the design, syllabus, sampling, and descriptive statistics was provided in this short article.

Pedro-Carroll and Cowen (1985); Pedro-Carroll, Cowen, Hightower, and Guare (1986); Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, and Cowen (1989); Pedro-Carroll and Alpert-Gillis (1997); Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, and Wyman (1999). The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP), a school-based program that teaches divorce facts, problem-solving skills, and coping skills and encourages normalization through sharing feelings. Five published evaluations of the program are reviewed here.

The earliest review was of 75 children in fourth, fifth, and sixth grade in suburban Rochester, New York. Forty-one participated in five groups each consisting of eight to nine children that met weekly for 10 weeks, and 34 served as the control (delayed-treatment) group. The groups were matched for

demographics and time since parental separation (Pedro-Carroll and Cowen, 1985). The intervention group reported significantly greater improvements in divorce attitudes and anxiety but not in self-esteem. Only the teacher, leader, and parent reports suggested significant improvements in problem-solving skills and school adjustment. The second evaluation (Pedro-Carroll, Cowen, Hightower and Guare, 1986) is similar to the first study, with a demographically matched control group of families with parents who have not yet separated. Children's self-reports of depression showed statistically significant improvements in the anticipated direction but not in overall problems. Teachers' reports were again more suggestive of treatment effects and showed statistically significant improvements in competence and behavioral problems. Parents' reports indicated treatment effects for overall adjustment.

CODIP had originally been designed around the normative experiences of middle-class, white, suburban families and their 9–12-year-old children. The syllabus was customized several times to include other relevant groups. First, it was revamped in recognition of ethnic diversity and children with never-married parents in urban Rochester (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, and Cowen, 1989). Fifty-two second and third graders participated in groups of four to eight in this 16-week program whose basic goals were the same as the original CODIP but included such subjects as turning to the extended family for support. This treatment group was compared to a demographically matched delayed-treatment group as well as to a matched group of children whose parents had never separated. The treatment and delayed-treatment groups scored significantly more poorly at pretreatment on all measures of adjustment. At posttreatment, the group self-report measures showed improvements to separation and adjustment but not to shyness or school adjustment. Teachers' reports showed improvements for behavioral adjustment and school performance, and parents' reports indicated improvements to adjustment. The program was repeated for fourth and fifth graders from the area; the evaluations compared their pre- and posttreatment measures (as reported by children, parents, and teachers) with those of the demographically matched divorce and nondivorce control groups. Children's reports regarding their feelings about the family and their attitudes, self-perception, and anxiety showed significantly greater improvements in the test group than in the two control groups. There were significantly greater gains in child attitudes and behaviors as reported by parents. Teacher reports were not significant, and because leaders did not rate nonparticipants, a treatment-control comparison was not possible. The authors reasonably asserted, but did not quantify, that the population in this study came from families with multiple problems (such as domestic violence, substance abuse, residential instability, and poverty).

The program was adapted again, this time for children in kindergarten (Pedro-Carroll and Alpert-Gillis, 1997). According to the research literature, children in that age group often feel very sad, blame themselves, and fear abandonment. As a group, there were greater pre- and posttreatment strides among the 37 treatment-group children than there were in the matched divorce control group along the dimensions of anxiety, self-perception, and communication with parents. There were significantly greater gains in parents' reports of attitudes and behavior and teachers' reports of divorce adjustment and school behavior. The gains were largely sustained at the two-year follow-up (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, and Wyman 1999), even though the direction of the attrition bias made the hypothesis of enduring improvements easier to reject.

Roseby and Deutsch (1985). A school-based intervention for fourth- and fifth-grade students in five schools in a medium-sized midwestern city that draws students from lower- and middle-class neighborhoods and consists of 10 weekly sessions. The evaluation was of 57 children who were placed in a control-group intervention, where they were encouraged to express their divorce-related feelings, or in a treatment group, where they were taught interpersonal knowledge (the ability to simultaneously hold their own and their parents' perspectives) through "social role-playing" exercises. Each intervention consisted of 10 weekly sessions. Controlling for gender, time since separation (0–18 months, 18–36 months, or 37 months–10 years), and self-reported divorce adjustment at pretreatment, positive treatment effects were found for posttreatment divorce adjustment. Neither gender nor length of separation was significant in that model. There were no treatment effects in either the self-reported depression survey or the teachers' assessments of behavior at school, which precluded an examination of a causal relationship between divorce adjustment and these more general measures of adjustment.

Stolberg and Garrison (1985) and Stolberg and Mahler (1994). The Child Support Group (part of the Divorce Adjustment Project), evaluated two times, is a longer (12- or 14-week) primary intervention program for primary- and middle-school children that teaches communication skills, understanding feelings, problem solving, self-control, anger management, and other prosocial skills. The program is co-led or supervised by Divorce Adjustment Project staff and interns and school personnel. The first evaluation (Stolberg and Garrison, 1985) analyzed pre- and posttreatment and five-month follow-up measures for 82 custodial-mother-child pairs nonrandomly assigned to four groups: (1) 12-week child intervention, (2) child intervention and 12-week support group for mothers, (3) mother intervention only, and (4) no interventions. Children in child-only intervention groups improved in self-concept and adaptive social skills more than those in the combined treatment program. The second evaluation (Stolberg and Mahler, 1994), of a 14-week program for third through fifth graders compared pretreatment, posttreatment, and one-year follow-up measures under four treatment conditions: (1) social support; (2) support and skill building; (3) support, skill building, and parent training; or (4) no interventions, if the children were part of the intact-family control group. The average length of parent separation in the treatment groups was 3.7 years. Large pretest differences (particularly in separation anxiety disorder) were found. The combination of skill building and support was the best in reducing poor behavior at home and internalizing and externalizing behavior.

Wolchik et al. (2000, 2002). *New Beginnings*. Recently, two published evaluations of a clinical trial intervention, *New Beginnings* in Maricopa County, Arizona, show positive treatment effects in pre- and posttreatment and six-month and six-year follow-up analyses. The first study (Wolchik et al., 2000), of a randomly assigned, highly restricted sample of 240 children ranging from 9 to 12 years old and their custodial mothers, compared child outcomes in four groups: mothers receiving intervention, children receiving intervention, a combined program, and placebo (a reading list was dispensed). Components of the 11-week mother's program and 11-week child's program targeted specific mediators of the effects of divorce on children's psychological adjustment, including mother-child relationship quality, discipline, conflict between parents, mother's attitudes towards father-child contact, and, for children, recognition of feelings, relaxation, problem solving, cognitive reframing, and ability to challenge negative appraisals. Measures included reports by mothers, children, and

teachers, as well as coded observations of mother-child interactions. Both treatment conditions improved many postintervention measures more than self-study. However, few additive improvements accrued to the children of dual-component treatment. (This is consistent with Stolberg and Garrison [1985].) At postintervention, any treatment improvements were observed in discipline, mother's attitudes toward the father-child relationship, and, for children, their threat appraisal, coping ability, coping styles, and externalization. Many program effects failed to sustain at the six-month follow-up.

The second publication analyzed the first study's 1993 cohort and included six-year follow-up data (Wolchik et al., 2002). That analysis confirmed a lack of significant differences between programs for the mother and dual programs.

Treatment had no expected effects on internalization, but long-term decreases in externalization and related antisocial behavior (including drug and alcohol use) were observed for children at the six-year follow-up. Unlike almost all the other studies, knowledge about divorce and divorce acceptance were not measured. Treatments had no effect on the frequency of contact with fathers, suggesting that any treatment effects on mothers' attitudes toward father-child contact did not foster increased contact. It is possible that restricting the sample to stable mother-custody families led to an overrepresentation of father-absent families, and thus the research design contributed to the absence of findings in this area.

#### **Judicial Council of California Administrative Office of the Courts**

Hon. Ronald M. George  
*Chief Justice of California  
and Chair of the Judicial Council*

William C. Vickrey  
*Administrative Director of the Courts*

Michael Bergeisen  
*General Counsel*

Diane Nunn  
*Director, Center for Families, Children & the Courts*

Charlene Depner  
*Senior Manager, Center for Families, Children & the Courts*

#### **Production of This Report**

Iona Mara-Drita, Author  
*Senior Research Analyst*

George Ferrick  
*Supervising Court Services Analyst*

Shelly Glapion  
*Senior Court Services Analyst*

Don Will  
*Supervising Research Analyst*

Danielle Tate  
*Secretary*

The CFCC staff thanks the following people for reviewing drafts of this update and giving helpful feedback:

Tracy Kenny  
*Senior Governmental Affairs Analyst*

Patricia Chavez-Fallon  
*Family Court Services Director  
Superior Court of California, County of San Diego*



CFCC generates and distributes research-based information that has promise for informing the work of family court services in California and nationwide. To learn more about its work and to see more *Research*

*Updates*, visit [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/).

455 Golden Gate Avenue, Sixth Floor  
San Francisco, California 94102-3688  
E-mail: [cfcc@jud.ca.gov](mailto:cfcc@jud.ca.gov)

*The views in this research update are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Judicial Council of California.*