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Cover Page Footnote

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Relational Dynamics Following Divorce: Evaluation of an Online Co-Parent Education Program

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Abstract. I sought to investigate the potential efficacy of an online divorce and co-parent education program. Across 9-years of evaluation data for the Focus on Kids online program, participants (N = 6,679) reported a high degree of program satisfaction. According to pre-post test reports, average knowledge of how to support children across the divorce transition increased. Participants also increased in their intention to avoid engaging in behaviors that are distressing for children. Overall, this study provides potential evidence for the efficacy of online divorce education and provides support for the advancement of online programming as a promising avenue for Extension more broadly.

INTRODUCTION

Although declining (Cohen, 2019), divorce rates have been relatively high over recent decades, with nearly one-half of marriages expected to end in divorce or separation (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). More than 36% of divorces involve residential minor children (Eickmeyer, 2016).

Scholars, policymakers, community members, and Extension educators are concerned about the consequences of divorce on children (e.g., long-term depression, trouble maintaining future intimate relationships; Amato, 2000, 2010). Divorce is a stressful transition for many, but most children exhibit resilience in this context (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In fact, a previously estimated 75% of children and young adults do not suffer from chronic adverse effects from this transition (see Kelly & Emery, 2003; see also Amato, 2010). Nevertheless, about 25% of children of divorced families do have serious social, behavioral, and psychological problems, compared to only 10% of children in never-divorced families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

To understand how to help children adjust to a divorce transition, scholars have turned to decades of empirical research (e.g., Amato, 2010; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). In sum, scholars have recommended reducing children's exposure to conflict and focus on cooperative parenting to help children adjust following divorce (Russell et al., 2016). In fact, com-

munication patterns within families and between parents have a significant influence on children's adjustment (Emery, 2012). Kelly and Emery (2003, p. 358) stated that "the differences in children's lives that determine their longer-term outcomes are dependent on many circumstances, among them their adjustment prior to separation, the quality of parenting they received before and after divorce, and the amount of conflict . . . between parents that they experienced during marriage and after divorce."

Thus, it is vital that educational programming for co-parents focus on positive communication and conflict resolution to reduce children's exposure to hostile conflict, de-triangulate children who feel caught in "the middle" between co-parents, and cease disparaging remarks made by one parent about another in front of the children.

Divorce and co-parent education programs are recommended and commonly used to reduce interparental conflict and improve child adjustment following divorce or separation (e.g., Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Ferraro et al., 2016; Kramer & Washo, 1993; Schramm & Becher, 2020; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999). One program that was created to fulfill these objectives is Focus on Kids (FOK). The FOK program has been translated to an online format to accommodate parents' busy schedules as they navigate the court system and with the understanding that individuals may be concerned about participating in in-person classes that focus on sen-

sitive issues (i.e., divorce) within their communities during crises (see also Bowers et al., 2011). For these reasons and several others, the use of technology and increasing online program delivery is becoming widely encouraged in Extension (see Diem et al., 2011; Dorn & Hobbs, 2020). This study evaluated an online program that is focused on addressing co-parenting concerns.

THE FOCUS ON KIDS PROGRAM

The FOK program is a 2.5-hour, mandated co-parenting education program for divorcing or separating parents of minor children (see Feng & Fine, 2001; Schramm & Calix, 2011). FOK is guided by several research-informed objectives: (a) to encourage ex-spouses to avoid triangulating their children into conflict (i.e., avoid putting their children in the middle of disputes) by managing conflicts pertaining to their children directly with each other (i.e., away from the children) in a respectful manner (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Grych, 2005); (b) to describe the benefits of having both parents remain actively involved in the lives of their children when safe or appropriate following divorce (Ahrons, 2007; Amato et al., 2011); (c) to provide practical, research-informed suggestions regarding helpful parental behaviors (e.g., suggestions for transitioning between households, using “I-messages”) and potentially unhealthy parental behaviors (e.g., speaking poorly of the other parent in the presence of the child, discussing financial issues with the child; Ferraro et al., 2016; Sigal et al., 2011); (d) to provide research-informed information on the influence of divorce on children’s socioemotional adjustment, with a focus on developmentally appropriate timing (i.e., differences based on the age of a child; Gumina, 2009; Kleinsorge & Covitz, 2012); and (e) to offer information community resources and human service referrals that may be helpful to children and parents as they navigate the divorce transition (see also Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Fine et al., 1999; Papernow, 2018; Schramm & Becher, 2020).

This program was adapted into an online format that follows the structure of the in-person class by offering video vignettes that include four scripted scenes depicting what co-parents and their children commonly experience across transitions from one household to another (e.g., negotiating pick-up times and adjusting to transitions between houses, accommodating differing parenting styles between co-parent homes, determining how to handle finances beyond child support, managing step-family dynamics). Each vignette is divided into two segments: one clip demonstrating a problem and then one clip illustrating a possible solution or resolution.

Following the “problem” clip examples, questions with response options and prompts with open-ended textboxes are provided to facilitate engagement and reflection on what went wrong in the clip, what the children in the clip may

be experiencing, and what could be done differently in the future. Similar questions follow the resolution clips, prompting participants to identify, for example, what went well or to reflect on what could have gone better. Before and after these four scripted vignettes, two video segments depict actual children discussing their feelings, reactions, and experiences related to their parents’ divorce and the following transition (for more information, see Feng & Fine, 2001; Schramm & Calix, 2011).

PRESENT STUDY

To determine whether the objectives were achieved in the online class, I sought to investigate the potential efficacy of the FOK online program. In line with past evaluations of divorce education (see Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Ferraro et al., 2016; Kramer & Washo, 1993; Schramm & Becher, 2020; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999), I assessed participants’ level of satisfaction with the program in addition to perceived change in knowledge about co-parenting experiences and intentions to avoid problematic co-parenting behaviors. Consumer satisfaction is viewed as an indicator of treatment adherence, feasibility, willingness to refer others, and a likelihood to seek out additional resources, such as therapy (for examples, see Davis et al., 2012; Fraser & Wu, 2016; Shek, 2010; Trotter, 2008). Several scholars (e.g., Shifflett & Cummings, 1999, p. 79) have also argued that increased knowledge is a worthy outcome of co-parenting education because “parents can be taught,” and, therefore, educational training may lead to the reduction in frequency and severity of future problems. Within the specific context of Extension programming, experts have noted that “new knowledge creates the foundation for new behaviors” (Pratt & Bowman, 2008, para 6), and assessing the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, skills, or aspirations is considered an advanced level on the hierarchy of measurable evaluation of impact, just before the practical application of knowledge, attitudes, skills, or aspirations through behavior change (Workman & Scheer, 2012). Research on the theory of planned behavior supports these claims, suggesting that knowledge and intentions are precursors for later behavior change, which, in this case, would improve child adjustment (e.g., Altenhofen et al., 2010). In fact, LaGriff et al. (2015; p. 130) stated, for example, “By knowing more about the impact of post-divorce triangulation and avoiding triangulation behaviors, parents are ultimately benefiting their children by reducing the likelihood of youth depression, anxiety, and delinquency.” Given the increasing demand for online education (e.g., Diem et al., 2011; Dorn & Hobbs, 2020), this study has implications for Extension programming beyond divorce education.

Divorce Education Evaluation

METHOD

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

Across 9 years of data (2012–2021), 6,679 participants completed the program and evaluation. Participants were referred from various court systems from their cases (a) seeking to modify co-parenting plans or to legally separate from or divorce their partner and (b) having minor children. Most participants identified as women (55.6%), and the average age was 34 (SD = 10.53). See Table 1 for demographics related to socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity of the sample. Moreover, 11% reported a veteran status, and 4.3% identified as currently serving in the military. Following completion of the court-mandated class described above, participants completed an evaluation of the program.

MEASURES

The program evaluation included a retrospective survey that assessed various demographic variables as well as participant reports of program satisfaction. This evaluation also included pre–post assessments of knowledge and behavioral intentions.

Program Satisfaction

Participants indicated their level of agreement with six items assessing their overall learning experience in the program. The response options ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Example items included “The program helped me think of new ways to resolve conflicts about the child(ren) with the child(ren)’s other parent” and “The program offered helpful suggestions to support my child(ren)’s relationships with me and with their other parent.” Although the present study used these items for descriptive purposes and, therefore, the items were analyzed separately, the scale demonstrated a high degree of reliability ($\alpha = .95$).

Program-Related Knowledge

The program evaluation used a retrospective pre–post design. Although this approach certainly has limitations, given its cross-sectional nature, scholars have argued that using pre–post designs when assessing program efficacy offers several advantages. For example, this form of assessment may reduce response shift bias, which occurs when a participant’s frame of reference (e.g., their perceived level of knowledge) changes as a result of learning more from the program itself (Lam & Bengo, 2003; Pratt et al., 2000). In fact, Schramm and Calix (2011, p. 537) stated that “it is not uncommon for participants in classes or programs to rate themselves high in levels of understanding and knowledge on pretests prior to a program and then realize after the program that they did not know as much as they thought. Thus, traditional methods might not capture changes in knowledge, awareness, and understanding that actually occur as a result of classes and programs.”

Table 1. Demographics (N = 6,679)

Demographic variables	%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White or Caucasian	91.2%
Black or African American	3.3%
Asian	.7%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	.7%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	.2%
Two or more/other	3.8%
Hispanic	4%
<i>Socioeconomic status</i>	
Work status	--
Full-time	81.5%
Part-time	7.6%
Not working for pay	6.1%
Student	1.8%
Disabled	2.3%
<i>Education</i>	
Less than high school	4.9%
High school diploma or GED	22.0%
Some college	25.7%
2-year college/technical degree	16.1%
4-year college degree	19.7%
Graduate degree	11.7%
<i>Income prior to separation/divorce</i>	
Below \$20,000	12.4%
\$20,000–\$34,999	17.4%
\$35,000–\$49,999	15.2%
\$50,000–\$69,999	17.1%
\$70,000–\$99,999	17.3%
\$100,000 and over	20.5%
<i>Income after separation/divorce</i>	
Below \$20,000	20.4%
\$20,000–\$34,999	25.4%
\$35,000–\$49,999	20.8%
\$50,000–\$69,999	15.5%
\$70,000–\$99,999	10.2%
\$100,000 and over	7.8%

Participants responded to prompts asking them to report their pre-program and post-program understanding of the impact of divorce and co-parental experiences on children and experiences that may help children adjust to the transition. One example read, “My understanding of how children are affected by divorce, separation, and not living with both parents” (see Table 2 for additional items). Response options ranged from 0 (*Poor*) to 4 (*Excellent*; $\alpha = .91, .94$ for pre–post scales, respectively).

Behavioral Intention

Using a similar approach to one employed to capture the understanding of program-related topics, participants also responded to items asking about their prior co-parental behaviors and their plans to avoid these same behaviors after the program. The question prompts stated, “Before the Focus on Kids program today I already did . . .” and “Now that I have completed the Focus on Kids program I plan to . . .” for pre–post behaviors, respectively. See Table 2 for items. Response options ranged from 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .88, .97$ for pre–post scale, respectively).

RESULTS

PROGRAM SATISFACTION

Participants reported that they were satisfied with all aspects of the program that were assessed. For example, 92.7% of participants reported that they agreed (51.2%) or strongly agreed (41.5%) that the information presented would influence their decisions regarding their children. Similarly, 89.9% reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped them think of new ways to resolve conflicts about the children with the other parent, and 92.8% agreed or strongly agreed that the program offered helpful suggestions to support their children’s relationships with them and with the other parent. Further, 93.1% agreed or strongly agreed that the program provided useful ideas about reducing stress for children. Consequently, 79.5% said that they agreed or strongly agreed that they thought the program should be required for divorcing or separating parents (11.9% indicated that they were unsure), and 87.2% indicated that overall, they agreed or strongly agreed that the program was worthwhile.

CO-PARENTING KNOWLEDGE AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

Paired-samples *t* tests were used to compare differences between pre–post scores across variables of interest. Following the program, participants reported significant increases in their knowledge of co-parenting practices and strategies (pre-test $M = 2.71, SD = .80$; post-test $M = 3.34, SD = .64$; $t [6,578] = -72.88, p < .001$) and increased intention to avoid maladaptive co-parenting behaviors (pre-test $M = 3.39, SD = .64$; post-test $M = 3.71, SD = .54$; $t [6,557] = -43.81, p < .001$). Further, Cohen’s *d* estimates for knowledge (.70) and

intention (.60) indicated robust effects. Given that I was unable to identify and match potential former partners in the anonymous surveys to test for nonindependence, I also ran these estimates separately by sex and found a similar pattern of results: significant increases in knowledge ($t [3,485] = -52.81, p < .001, d = .69$; $t [2,779] = -47.97, p < .001, d = .72$ for women and men, respectively) and intention ($t [3,483] = -33.93, p < .001, d = .60$; $t [2,766] = -26.42, p < .001, d = .59$ for women and men, respectively). See Table 2 for ancillary *t* tests at the item level.

DISCUSSION

Overall, participants reported a high degree of satisfaction with the program. This response is noteworthy, given the fact that the class was mandated by the court. Schramm and Calix (2011, p. 531) argued that “resentment of having to attend a program is more likely to occur with mandatory attendees than with voluntary attendees, and that resentment might influence evaluations of program effectiveness.” In addition to program satisfaction, I found support for the potential efficacy of the FOK online course. On average, knowledge of how to support children across the divorce transition increased according to pre–post reports. Similarly, following the program, participants increased their intention to avoid engaging in behaviors that would be distressing for their children. For example, participants increasingly reported plans to avoid saying negative things about their co-parent and fighting with the co-parent in front of the children. These behaviors align with extant research on best practices to support children’s adjustment to divorce (e.g., Amato, 2010), which is an important focus of the FOK program.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although this study had many notable strengths, including a very large sample size, there are several considerations to note when interpreting these results. First, there was no randomization or control group to which to compare participants upon completion of the course. Future research might implement a waitlist control to provide additional evidence that the changes are truly attributable to the program. One past study comparing 778 participants who completed the in-person class and 517 participants who completed the online version demonstrated few differences between online and in-person delivery of divorce education (Schramm & McCaulley, 2012). This past study also did not include random assignment, and self-selection bias was noted as a limitation. Thus, Schramm and McCaulley’s (2012) study further reinforced the ethical and pragmatic difficulty in randomizing participants into programming that is court-mandated. Relatedly, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person implementation for several years, which increased the

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Table 2. Ancillary *t* Tests at the Item Level

Variable/Item	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>Knowledge/Understanding</i>			
“My understanding of how children are affected by divorce, separation, and not living with both parents”	-70.15***	6,530	.81
“My understanding of the importance of developing a plan that provides opportunities for both parents to have relationships with children”	-60.78***	6,493	.81
“My understanding of the benefits to my children if their other parent and I cooperate”	-56.99***	6,485	.78
“My understanding that children have different needs during divorce than divorcing parents”	-63.89***	6,491	.83
<i>Behavioral Intention</i>			
“Avoid arguing/fighting with my children’s other parent in front of the children”	-39.66***	6,537	.80
“Avoid questioning my children about their other parent’s finances”	-27.88***	6,526	.67
“Avoid questioning my children about their other parent’s relationships”	-30.48***	6,515	.75
“Avoid saying negative things about my children’s other parent in front of them”	-38.72***	6,482	.80
“Make a stronger effort to work with the other parent for the children’s sake”	-36.58***	6,403	.73

*** $p < .001$.

demand for online education but constrained the use of an in-person comparison group.

Although a retrospective pre-post design has several advantages (Lam & Bengo, 2003; Pratt et al., 2000), it is not possible to attribute any perceived changes to the intervention itself. Likewise, no long-term follow-up survey was included in this cross-sectional study. Although it is a critical first step in creating change, intention to engage in a future behavior is different from actual implementation of those behaviors. Assessing participants’ follow-through with their intentions would further bolster support for effectiveness. Nevertheless, others have found continued effectiveness 4–10 months after completion for the in-person classes (Schramm & Calix, 2011). Although Schramm and Calix’s (2011) study included attrition, those who completed the long-term follow-up continued to report avoiding conflict with or disparaging the other co-parent in front of the children above pretest levels. Similarly, it should be acknowledged that self-reports have the potential to be influenced by a social-desirability bias, with participants wishing to make a positive impression and please the researcher (Holtgraves, 2004). Evidence suggests that anonymity can reduce this tendency for social desirability (Holtgraves, 2004), but the potential bias cannot be ruled out in this study. Given the anonymous nature of the surveys, I was unable to determine how many dyads (former couples) were in the study and assess or fully account for any potential nonindependence between former partners. Running analyses by sex, however, resulted in a similar pattern of significance. To account for several of these methodological limitations, future research should randomize participants to

the intervention or a control group, follow participants over time, and assess for actual behavioral changes in addition to knowledge gained and intentions to implement learned skills.

Last, although the demographics of the sample mapped onto the general and married demographics of the region in which the classes took place (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), the sample was far from representative. For example, participants were mostly White. Given that the course fulfills a divorce education requirement within the state for those seeking legal separation or divorce, the limited diversity could reflect the fact that Black couples marry at lower rates than do White couples due to a variety of barriers, including an oppressive history of systemic exclusion from the institution (Bryant et al., 2010; Raley et al., 2015; Williams & Baker, 2021). Likewise, legal systems and proceedings have been critiqued for biases against Black individuals (e.g. Rachlinski et al., 2009); therefore, when terminating a nonmarital relationship, Black couples may find alternative methods for dealing with such matters as child custody outside the court system. Although speculative, this idea is further supported by research suggesting that in a marriage, “separated Black couples are less likely to make the transition to divorce than separated White couples” (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002, p. 8). The high proportion of lower-income individuals within the sample might reflect another bias within the legal system—the ability of more affluent clients to afford higher-quality representation (Hadfield, 2000; Yoon, 2009), which could result in certain requirements being waived or alternative options to typical co-parent education offerings. It is important to reiterate

that these explanations are speculative. The evaluation survey was established for the purposes of internal program improvement and implemented before the current analysis. Therefore, the demographic options and measures were limited to reduce participant burden and prioritize anonymity, which constrained what could be assessed. Future research could expand demographic options and include measures that would assess such experiences as parental stress and well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTENSION

Online classes are a viable option for Extension (Diem et al., 2011). As resources become more limited within universities, and within Extension in particular, novel and innovative approaches are important to reduce travel costs and time constraints (Page & Kern, 2018). Online courses also create additional opportunities for access for participants (e.g., Stotz et al., 2019).

Although there are geographic and income disparities in who has access to the Internet, these gaps tend to be narrowing, with most people in the United States having access (e.g., Perrin, 2021; see also Dorn & Hobbs, 2020). With regard to divorce education courses specifically (and other courses that cover sensitive topics), participants may be more comfortable completing the class and learning the content within the safety and privacy of their own home and on their own schedule. For example, court-mandated classes need to be completed before a case can be scheduled, resulting in the need for quick completion in some cases, which makes scheduling a future session with limited options difficult for participants. Obviously, online classes also have considerable drawbacks; however, several studies have provided evidence that online and in-person classes are similarly effective (e.g., Braithwaite & Fincham, 2011; Schramm & McCaulley, 2012). I found evidence of increased knowledge of issues related to divorce and increased parent behavioral intentions regarding co-parenting following the program. Nevertheless, further research is needed to corroborate the benefits of online divorce and co-parent education, especially studies assessing behavior change over time to determine objective impact. This call for further research is in line with common criticisms of Extension evaluation, given that evaluators often report on the simple number of the people who participated in a program instead of assessing higher-level outcomes (see Workman & Scheer, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Many scholars have argued that online program delivery may help close many service-access gaps (e.g., Braithwaite & Fincham, 2011) and is an important resource for Extension pro-

fessionals (Diem et al., 2011). This need for online delivery is especially salient for programs that focus on sensitive topics, such as divorce and co-parenting, and serve participants with complicated schedules who may be in crisis. Across 9 years of evaluation data for the FOK program, participants not only reported that the program was helpful overall; they also reported increases in knowledge of what is helpful for children of divorce and behavioral intentions to avoid co-parental hostility following program completion. Overall, this study provided preliminary evidence for the efficacy of online divorce education and support for the advancement of online programming as a promising avenue for Extension more broadly.

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