Description and Evaluation of the Orientation for Divorcing Parents: Implications for Postdivorce Prevention Programs*

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This article addresses design and evaluation issues of community-based programs for families experiencing marital separation and divorce. The article is divided into four sections. General programmatic issues are reviewed and discussed in section 1. In section 2, a specific community-based program entitled "The Orientation for Divorcing Parents" is presented. Section 3 contains details of the formal evaluation of this specific program, and section 4 discusses implications of this literature review and evaluation study for future programs for families characterized by marital divorce.

The first purpose of this article is to review the literature on postdivorce prevention programs. The second purpose is to describe and evaluate a community-based primary prevention program for divorcing parents entitled "Orientation for Divorcing Parents" (ODP), and to discuss implications from this review and project for practitioners developing prevention programs in their own communities.

Prevention Programs for Divorcing Families

The need for preventive mental health programs for divorced families has increased during the last decade for several reasons. Some of these reasons include: (a) Large numbers of parents and children are involved in marital separation and divorce, (b) many of these family members experience a short-term increase in stress and mental health problems, (c) family relationships are disrupted when one parent moves out of the house and the other spouse's parenting responsibilities increase, and (d) family members' vulnerabilities to longer term problems increase.

Undoubtedly, many programs and workshops already have been developed. However, few of these have been documented in the scholarly literature and even fewer have been evaluated formally. (Important exceptions include projects reported by Bloom, Hodges, & Caldwell, 1982; Byrne, 1990; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Rugel & Sieracki, 1981; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985; and Warren et al., in press.) This lack of documentation has impeded the development and implementation of high-quality programs for divorced families because as noted by Small (1990) "without good documentation of existing programs, new programs are likely to invest much time and energy reinventing strategies that others found promising or repeating the same mistakes made by earlier programs" (p. 132).

Practitioners need to consider several important issues as they plan, implement, and revise community-based prevention programs for families experiencing marital separation. In a review of prevention programs, Stolberg (1988) stated that these programs need to include content that is consistent with the current knowledge base, outlines basic processes of normal development, and addresses specific crisis-related issues. This approach to psychoeducational programming reflects what we have labeled "informed practice" and has been supported by Roosa and Christopher (1990) in their evaluation of pregnancy prevention programs. In their argument for the use of a strong research base for program development they state designers of "successful prevention programs must make wise choices not only about which variables to target for intervention but also about how to change those variables in the desired direction" (p. 367).

In conjunction with decisions regarding content, program developers also need to consider which aspect of the content will be addressed. Three important options include providing information, trying to change attitudes, and training in specific skills. For example, informing parents of various reactions children can have to marital separation is an informational aspect. Helping parents respond appropriately and sensitively to their children's reactions is a skill-building aspect. Within any given reasonable number of sessions, it is not possible to attend to all three aspects across a broad range of content. Thus, the practitioner often must make difficult, limiting choices during the course of planning a community-based educational program.

In addition to issues related to content, program structure, organization, and method need to be considered. These include issues such as the number and length of sessions, participant eligibility, relationship to the family court, location, cost, format, and types of teaching strategies and techniques to be used. Although length of programs reported in the literature range from 5 weeks (Warren et al., in press) to 6 months (Bloom et al., 1982), Davidoff and Schiller (1983) recommend that programs for adults last 6 to 8 weeks (weekly meetings). Croesby-Burnett and Newcomer (1990) recommend 8 to 10 sessions for children's programs. Also based on reports of existing programs, the most effective time block for parents seems to be about 2 to 3 hours and for children a little less than 1 hour. Although relatively inefficient in terms of social service resources, groups of 5 to 15 people seem to be most effective (Davidoff & Schiller, 1983).

Community factors also affect program development and implementation. A centrally arranged, safe location with close, free parking encourages participation. And although some divorcing parents resist the perceived intrusion, a strong endorsement by the judge, particularly in the form of a letter to the parent, also encourages participation.

One of the important issues discussed in the postdivorce prevention literature is who to target and at what stage...
of the divorcing process (see Stolberg, 1988, for an excellent review). Programs can be developed for children (and usually are school-based), for parents specifically, for divorcing adults (regardless of parental status), and for whole families. Although the strongest evaluation research exists on programs developed for children, some data exist on programs for adults/parents. These data suggest that children’s programs are most effective when affective (heavy emphasis), cognitive, and behavioral issues are addressed (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985), whereas parents’ programs are most effective when parenting skills and the parent-child relationship are addressed (Stolberg, 1988). Program timing in terms of the divorcing process has not been addressed in the prevention literature. However, the divorce adjustment literature suggests that the period from separation to 1 year postdivorce is the most stressful portion of the divorce transition for most families (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Thus, it seems that programs scheduled during this period could offer the greatest potential of preventative effects.

In terms of teaching methods, activities will differ for children and adults but both require fairly structured programs (Kessler, 1978; Stolberg, 1988). Effective activities for children can be found in program manuals developed by Pedro-Carroll (1984) and Stolberg, Cullen, Garrison, and Brophy (1981). Programs for adults seem to work well when sessions include a short didactic component, some large group discussion, and structured small group activities (Davidoff & Schiller, 1993; Warren et al., in press).

In addition to issues related to program content and organization, evaluation content and procedures also require attention. In an excellent discussion of the evaluation of family life education programs, Small (1990) argues that every program needs some form of evaluation and that any evaluation should be designed to provide useful information for program developers and sponsors. Using Jacobs (1988) five-tiered approach to program evaluation, Small states that every program goes through stages of development and that different forms of evaluation are appropriate at various stages. Well-established postdivorce prevention programs that have potential for wide applicability should be evaluated rigorously using criteria outlined by Sprenkle and Storm (1983). Some of these criteria include the use of random assignment to treatment and control groups; pre, post, short, and long-term follow-up assessments; and the use of various reliable and valid measures of effectiveness.

Description of ODP Program

Many communities have recognized the needs of families experiencing divorce by offering programs for separated or recently divorced parents. Programs for divorcing adults, rather than children, are more common because they are less expensive and can accommodate larger numbers of participants with less attention to differential age and development statuses. One of the premises behind the decision to offer programs for adults is that children and families are more resilient when parents are emotionally healthy and skilled in parenting, communication, and conflict management (Olsen, 1989).

The Orientation for Divorcing Parents (ODP) is an example of such a program developed to meet the needs of divorcing parents, and indirectly, their families. ODP is a community-based, educational prevention program offered by Child and Family Services, a nonprofit community service agency in a large southern city in Tennessee. Until recently, state divorce laws and practice gave preference to sole legal custody of children and did not address the role of mediation in divorce proceedings. Current statutes include a provision for joint legal custody, although only a minority of couples select or seek this type of legal custody arrangement. Mediation is not offered by the court system and private mediators are used by only a very small number of divorcing couples.

Most of the parents attend ODP before their divorce has been finalized, but after a petition for divorce has been filed. Concurrent sessions are offered on Monday and Tuesday evenings because of the program requirement that divorcing spouses attend separate sessions. Scheduling two nights per session was fortuitous, ultimately because of the large demand for the program (about 35 participants per evening).

The program was developed by Phyllis Betz and Mary Evans and pilot-tested early in 1985. Using input from program participants and professional clinical experience, the content and format were revised and the program has been offered continuously since. The extensive, formal evaluation occurred during 1986 and 1987.

ODP was designed to be a general educational program that focused on several aspects of the divorce experience. It was designed to help prevent or minimize divorce-related problems by: (a) identifying potential problems, (b) increasing parents’ awareness of healthy ways to work through the divorce, (c) instilling them with a sense of increased mastery, (d) teaching them specific skills to negotiate the transition, and (e) helping mobilize existing coping strategies that may be paralyzed due to high levels of stress.

Although only three sessions were planned originally, pilot testing resulted in a program that includes five weekly, 2-hour sessions. The first session focuses on parent’s adjustment, based on research findings suggesting that children are likely to adjust better if their parents are free from serious adjustment problems (Furstenberg & Seltzer, 1986; Hetherington et al., 1982). Topics include the common emotional and cognitive responses, the grief cycle, feelings associated with being left or leaving, self-esteem, and the positive aspects of change.

The second session of ODP addresses common responses children have to marital separation and how parents address concerns. The literature on children and divorce suggests that children are less vulnerable to serious problems if parents can respond appropriately and sensitively to children’s responses postseparation (Barrett, Gaudio, & Sumner, 1980; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Hodges, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Parents’ appropriate responses and attention to children are facilitated through instruction and discussion of common responses children of different ages have to marital separation and divorce.

The third session addresses various legal aspects of divorce. A videotape of an interview with the local family court judge is played and discussed. In this tape the judge explains custody and support issues and talks about the legal process of obtaining a divorce. Many divorcing parents find the legal aspects of the divorce somewhat complicated and confusing; yet, often they find their attorneys unhelpful in working through these difficulties (Spanier & Thompson, 1994). Relatively detailed information concerning the legal aspects of divorce need to be provided postseparation (Ferreiro, Warren, & Konanc, 1986), because this type of technical support seems to be related positively to psychoemotional well-being following separation (Buehler & Legg, in press).

Sessions 4 and 5 of ODP focus on the former spouse relationship and to some extent on parent-child relations. Topics included in session 4 are the use of nonconfrontational messages, listening skills, and techniques to keep communication lines open. Topics included in session 5 are the healthy aspects of conflict, rules for arguing, and negotiation techniques. The emphasis on negotiation is included because continued interparental conflict
and hostility, as well as coercive, power-assertive parenting, hamper children’s adjustment postdivorce (Emery, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1982, 1989). Good negotiation skills help manage and resolve conflict in such a way as to reduce hostility and coerciveness, and over time, increase interparental cooperation and parent-child supportiveness.

The material is introduced by a short lecture and several handouts. Role play often is used to demonstrate the specific skill being discussed. Each of these didactic sections is followed by an hour of small group activities that provide participants with the opportunity to practice the targeted skills. The sessions are concluded by coming back together in the large group to discuss issues generated in the small groups. Thus, using material abstracted from the divorce literature, ODP was developed to cover a rather wide range of divorce-related content using a variety of teaching modalities in a relatively structured format.

Evaluation of ODP
Objectives, Data Collection, Research Design

Objectives. The evaluation of ODP contained three major components: (a) collecting background, individual, and familial information on ODP participants and comparing this information with other divorcing parents in the county who chose not to attend the program (nonparticipants); (b) collecting information from the ODP participants on their satisfaction with the program; and (c) comparing ODP participants and nonparticipants on the amount of change from pre- to postprogram (10 weeks) on selected individual and familial factors.

Data collection. The evaluation aspect of this project relied on survey data collected in 1986 and 1987, and through the coding of court records of each participant and nonparticipant in 1987. Subjects were 143 participating and 99 nonparticipating parents. Each parent received a letter from the judge in which he strongly encouraged (but did not require) ODP attendance. Each parent in the study completed a 12-page, preprogram assessment (T1). Ten weeks later at Time 2 (T2), parents were asked by mail to complete the postprogram assessment (three requests for continued participation were made). Responses were received from 68 participants and 31 nonparticipants.

Research design. One of the important design issues in evaluation research is trying to obtain a balance between internal and external validity. Although issues of internal validity cannot be sacrificed, it is important when evaluating program appropriateness and effectiveness to consider who it is that chooses to come to community-based programs. The effectiveness of a community-based program needs to be evaluated using subjects who would choose to participate, regardless of the study. This means that one aspect of the design used in this study was the self-selection of subjects, rather than random recruitment and assignment to treatment groups. The goal was to gain a thorough understanding of the clientele profile and to determine program effectiveness based on the natural community sample of participants and nonparticipants.

Measurement

In addition to background and court record information, four categories of variables were measured during evaluation: parent variables, child variables (using parent report), parenting, and former spouse relations. The court record information was targeted to assess the material presented in ODP session 3. The parent variables were targeted to assess session 1, and to a limited extent, session 3. The child variables were targeted to assess session 2. The parenting variables were targeted to assess sessions 2, 4, and 5. The former spouse variables were targeted to assess sessions 4 and 5.

Parents’ variables. This evaluation category included parents’ well-being, life change, and social support. Four dimensions of well-being were measured using previously established (but not standardized) measures: life satisfaction, self-esteem, emotional affect, and psychosomatic symptomatology. Life satisfaction was measured by averaging five items with scale responses ranging from not satisfied (1) to extremely satisfied (3) (Spanier & Thompson, 1984). Cronbach’s alpha was .70. Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg’s scale (1965). The items were reversed so that a 1 indicated low and a 4 indicated high self-esteem. Cronbach’s alpha was .83. Emotional affect was measured by the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn, 1965). The frequency of various positive and negative feelings about life were measured by averaging 10 items with scale responses ranging from never (1) to often (4). Cronbach’s alpha was .84. Psychosomatic symptomatology was measured by a summed composite of nine primary symptoms such as sleeplessness, headaches, and indigestion experienced in the previous month. This composite as used by Spanier and Thompson (1984) demonstrated a relationship between marital disruption and physical changes, indicating some evidence of construct validity in the context of marital status.

Two dimensions of life change were measured: occurrence and subjectively perceived disruptiveness (Buehler & Legg, in press). Occurrence of life change was measured by summing the responses to a list of 22 events, situations, or strains that parents may have experienced since the separation. Examples include I have moved, I have changed jobs, and meeting household expenses has been more difficult. Perceived disruptiveness was measured by averaging disruption responses to the 22 items, responses that ranged from experienced this but it was not disruptive to extremely disrupted this and it was very disruptive (5). As a result, this measure provided information on the question: “Of the events experienced, how disruptive were they on the average?” (Nonoccurrence items were not included in the disruptiveness score, and thus, this method of calculation did not aggregate occurrence and perceived disruptiveness.)

Six social support variables were assessed: current need for support, and number of support sources used for child care, finances, social, discussing feelings, and intimacy/sex. Current need for support was measured using the following instruction: "Please circle any of the following in which you currently need assistance." The six response categories were child care, finances, discussing feelings, social needs, intimacy/sex, and discussing the separation (Berg & Kurdek, 1983). Number of support sources for each support need was measured by asking the parent to record use of support in that one area from 13 possible sources of support such as friends, relatives, attorneys, and books. This methodology resulted in scale scores that could range from 0 to 13.

Child variables. This category included child social competence, problematic divorce-related beliefs, physical health, environmental change, and social support. Parent’s report of child well-being was based on one child in the family who was randomly selected by the researchers. Five dimensions of social competence were measured: aggression, dependency, withdrawal, anxiety/depression, and productivity. These were assessed using the Child and Adolescent Adjustment Profile (CAAP) (Ellsworth, 1979). This measure was used because it has been validated for children from ages 3 to 18 years and because it includes measures of externalized, internalized, antisocial, and prosocial behaviors. The factor structure of the instrument was validated for this sample such that only items with factor loadings greater than .40 and

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that clearly loaded on only one factor were retained for this study. Cronbach's alpha was .81 for aggression (4 items), .83 for dependency (4 items), .78 for withdrawal (5 items), .64 for anxiety/depression (3 items), and .78 for productivity (4 items).

Six problematic divorce-related beliefs were measured: shame, abandonment fears, blame parent, blame self, behave better, and reconciliation desires (Berg & Kurdek, 1983). For each item, parents rated their child on a 4-point scale that ranged from never (1) to often (4).

Children's physical health was measured by a scale which included: frequency of complaints of not feeling well, number of days absent from school due to illness, frequency of accidents and injuries requiring a doctor's attention, and the number of visits to the doctor.

The occurrences of seven environmental changes since the separation were measured: changed household routines, changed schools, moved, had less time with parent, financial deterioration, changes in maternal employment, and appearances in juvenile court.

Social support for five needs were measured: physical care/supervision, social, emotional/being loved, and discussing separation. Number of support sources for each need was measured by asking the parent to record use of support for the child's need in any one area from 10 possible sources of support such as grandparents, siblings, coaches or club leaders, and neighbors. This methodology resulted in four scale scores that could range from 0 to 10.

Parenting. Three categories of parenting variables were assessed: characteristics of parenting relationship, household organization, and visitation. Five dimensions of general parenting were measured: daily involvement, companionship, communication, coercive control, and frequency of control attempts. Daily involvement was measured using Ahrons (1983) parental involvement scale. Parents recorded the amount of their involvement with the child in 10 activities such as running errands, attending important functions, discussing problems, and preparing meals. The scale ranged from low (1) to high (5) involvement and Cronbach's alpha was .88. Companionship was measured by the following question: "How often do you and your child have a good time together?" Scale responses ranged from never (1) to always (5) (Berg & Kurdek, 1983). Communication was measured by the following question: "How often does your child tell you about his/her day?" Scale responses ranged from never (1) to always (5). Two specific aspects of communication about the separation were measured: frequency and range of content (Berg & Kurdek, 1983). Scale responses for frequency of separation-related discussions ranged from never (1) to always (5). Range of content was a summed scale that assessed the degree to which the parents utilized these activities. The time content measured ranged from 0 to 10. Coercive control was measured as the sum of parents' self-reported control behaviors used frequently in the past week, including yelling, threatening, hitting or spanking. The frequency of control attempts was measured by the question: "When your child misbehaves, how often do you discipline him/her?" Responses ranged from never (1) to always (5) (Berg & Kurdek, 1983).

Three aspects of household organization were measured: supervision, meals, and bedtimes. Responses to these items were aggregated into a measure such that a low score represented no supervision while the parent was at work, and irregular meals and bedtimes, whereas a high score represented the presence of adult supervision while the parent was at work and fairly regular meals and bedtimes.

Three dimensions of visitation by the nonresidential parent were measured: frequency, duration, and child's attitude toward visitation (Berg & Kurdek, 1983). Frequency was measured by the question: "How often does the nonresidential parent see the children?" Scale responses ranged from never (1) to daily (7). Duration was measured by the question: "How long are the visitation periods usually?" Scale responses ranged from a few minutes (1) to a week or more (7) (no visitation was coded 0). Child's attitude toward visitation was measured by the question: "Which most closely describes the child before visitation?" Scale responses ranged from refuses to go at times (1) to seems to look forward to it (4).

Former spouse relations. Five aspects of former spouse relations were included in this category: preseparation direct competition, current indirect competition, current disagreement over parenting, current cooperation in parenting, and settlement disputes.

Preseparation direct competition was measured by averaging four items that asked parents to report the frequency of stressful or tense conversation, verbal attacks, physical attacks, and hostile and angry atmosphere before the separation (Jacobson, 1978). Scale responses ranged from never (1) to always (5) and Cronbach's alpha was .83.

Current indirect competition was measured by averaging responses from six items that asked the frequency in which a parent tried to get the child as an ally, tried to get from the child personal information about the other parent, or denigrated the other parent in some way (Kurdek, 1987). Cronbach's alpha was .70.

Disagreement over parenting (co-parental conflict) was measured by averaging 21 scale items that assessed the frequency of disagreements on various areas of child rearing, (e.g., discipline, religious training, children's school problems, adapted from Ahrons, 1981). Cronbach's alpha was .93.

Cocparental cooperation was measured by averaging seven items that asked parents to assess the frequency in which each parent served as a resource to the other parent, was supportive of the other's parenting, and was flexible in parenting arrangements (Ahrons, 1981). Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Disagreements about settlement issues was measured by averaging five items that indicated the frequency of disagreement over spousal support, child support, visitation, children's residence, and financial issues other than support (e.g., property). Cronbach's alpha was .78. (Validity information on all of the measures used in this study can be obtained from the first author.)

Clientele Profile

The first objective of this study was to collect background, individual, and familial information on ODP participants and to compare this information with other divorcing parents in the county who choose not to attend the program (nonparticipants). This was accomplished by examining and comparing subjects' sociodemographic characteristics, the nature of their divorce settlements, and various individual and familial characteristics (i.e., parent variables, child variables, parenting, former spouse relations).

Sociodemographics of the T1 ODP Parents

These data help identify the background characteristics of the divorcing parents who chose to attend ODP. The mean age was 31 years for mothers (SD = 5.83) and 34 years for fathers (SD = 6.91). The median length of marriage was 10 years (SD = 5.45). Eighty-nine percent of the participants had either one or two children. The marriage currently being dissolved was the first marriage for 77% of both mothers and fathers. Seventy-

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of education and income, occupational status, number of hours employed per week, perceived economic well-being, number of children, visitation patterns, and residential parent status. (The probability level was set at .01 for this project because the comprehensive nature of the assessment protocol required a great number of statistical tests. The .01 level was chosen over the conventional .05 to reduce the possible number of Type I errors. An even more conservative probability level was not used to help avoid committing Type II errors.)

However, there were a few differences that indicate that the group of ODP parents is somewhat unique when compared to nonparticipating parents. Participants filed more pre-decree legal requests (an average of .81 per divorce) than the nonparticipants (.27 per divorce), t(213) = -3.45, p = .001, and were much more likely to be contesting aspects of the settlement than nonparticipants, X^2(2, N = 219) = 16.92, p = .000. Thus, although the participants and nonparticipants were similar on almost every background characteristic, the specific nature of their divorces differed.

Individual and Familial Characteristics at T1

How did the participants and nonparticipants compare at T1 on individual and familial characteristics?

Parent variables. At the beginning of the ODP program, the participants and nonparticipants did not differ in life satisfaction, self-esteem, emotional affect, and psychosomatic symptomatology. There were no differences in the occurrence rates of 22 divorce-related changes when they entered the program. Compared to nonparticipants, participants were more likely to be (a) contesting the divorce settlement, X^2(1, N = 240) = 11.17, p = .000; (b) concerned about who will get what, X^2(1, N = 240) = 32.98, p = .000; (c) having difficulty with their lawyer, X^2(1, N = 240) = 6.63, p = .01; (d) believing that the relationship with their spouse was worse since the separation, X^2(1, N = 240) = 9.71, p = .00; and (e) feeling as though they did not control their own lives, X^2(1, N = 240) = 8.61, p = .00.

Out of the seven support variables assessed, participants and nonparticipants did not differ on five at T1: need for support, receipt of support for discussing the separation, financial needs, social needs, and child care. There were two group differences: participants had received less support for general emotional needs, F(1, 229) = 7.99, p = .005, and for intimacy/sex, F(1, 229) = 5.90, p = .001.

Child variables. At the beginning of the ODP program, the children of participants and nonparticipants did not differ on parents’ reports of their dependency, aggression, withdrawal, anxiety/depression, or productivity. In addition, there were no differences on the parents’ frequency reports of children’s shame over the separation, reconciliation fantasies, abandonment fears, beliefs that if they had behaved better their parents would not have separated, and beliefs that they (the child) were the reason for the separation. However, when compared to children of nonparticipants, the children of participating parents were more likely to blame one of their parents for the separation and experiencing divorce, F(6, 163) = 5.86, p = .017.

Participants and nonparticipants did not differ at T1 on their reports of child’s physical health. Finally, there were seven divorce-related life changes that could be classified as changes in the child’s environment. There were no T1 group differences on the disruption associated with any of the seven: financial deterioration, school change, moves, mother’s employment, less time with their parent, changed household routines, and appearances at juvenile court.

Parenting. There were no differences between the participants and nonparticipants on the various measures of parenting at T1, including parent-child companionship, general communication, daily involvement, use of coercion, and perceived child compliance.

Former spouse relationship. There were no T1 group differences on the level of pre-separation competition between spouses and the current level of cooperation. However, when compared to the nonparticipants, participants reported more frequent settlement disputes, E(1, 224) = 25.69, p = .000 (participant X = 2.32, SD = .95; nonparticipant X = 1.86, SD = .75). There was also a trend such that participants reported more indirect competition, F(1, 210) = 5.49, p = .02 (participant X = 1.87, SD = .64; nonparticipant X = 1.65, SD = .64), and more disagreement over parenting issues, E(1, 227) = 5.22, p = .02 (participant X = 2.21, SD = .74; nonparticipant X = 1.92, SD = .63).

In sum, the comparison of ODP participants and nonparticipants at Time 1 indicated that the two groups reported similar levels of general well-being and self-esteem, reported similar levels of child well-being, similar parenting issues and styles, and the same level of cooperation with soon-to-be former spouses. Group differences existed for the level of, and stress associated with, negotiating the divorce settlement and the negative,
hostile aspects of the former spouse relationship.

**Evaluation of ODP Program**

**Consumer Satisfaction**

The ODP participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the program and the helpfulness of the ODP experience in dealing with 12 specific divorce-related issues (see Table 1). The participants reported their level of satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied.

The satisfaction responses were examined for the T2 ODP participants as a whole group, and then analyzed by four specific background characteristics using Chi-square statistics (sex of parent, residential status of the children, initiator status of the respondent, and the couple's legal contest status). Satisfaction responses also were analyzed by several measures of parents' and children's well-being, parenting, and qualities of former spouse relations using t-tests for independent samples.

**General satisfaction.** The participants generally were satisfied with the ODP program (see Table 1). More than 75% of the parents rated their level of satisfaction as either "very satisfied" (40%) or "somewhat satisfied" (38%). Although no one indicated substantial dissatisfaction with the program, a minority of participants characterized their attitudes as "mixed" or "somewhat dissatisfied" (21%). The percentage of satisfied ODP participants falls on the high end of the satisfaction rates obtained in other postdivorce prevention programs as reported by Sprenkle and Storm (1983).

Detailed analyses of the satisfaction ratings indicated that women, leavers, and uncontestant parents were more satisfied with the ODP program than men, leavers, and contesting parents. In terms of well-being and relational factors, the more and less satisfied parents were more similar than different. The few reported differences failed to favor consistently either group.

**Helpfulness ratings.** Participants generally found the ODP experience to be "somewhat" or "much" help in dealing with the 12 specific divorce-related issues. Importantly, they judged the program to be most helpful with parent-child relations, dealing with divorce-related feelings, and identifying coping strategies, and least helpful with the spouse relationship and legal aspects of divorce. This pattern did not vary by sex of parent, residential status of children, initiator status of respondent, and the couple's legal contest status.

To summarize the consumer satisfaction ratings, the majority of the ODP participants, whether considered as a total group or by selected divorce-related and familial characteristics, were "somewhat" or "very satisfied" with the program. It appears that participants' satisfaction with the program reflected their perception of the program as helpful in dealing with several important personal and relational aspects of the divorcing process. However, they needed more help dealing with their spouse and with legal issues. As a group, these parents came to the workshop with somewhat unique difficulties in relating to their spouse and evidently needed more help than they were able to get from the program as it was designed. Suggestions for changes in the ODP format and other postdivorce prevention programs will be offered at the end of this discussion.

**Evaluation of Individual Well-Being and Relational Functioning**

In addition to obtaining ratings of satisfaction and helpfulness, the effectiveness of ODP was evaluated by comparing the change rates (T1 to T2) of the participant and nonparticipant groups on several of the assessment measures. It was expected that participants would change more than nonparticipants. Statistically, these analyses were conducted using a repeated measures technique developed by O'Brien and Kaiser (1985). This technique involved subtracting the Time 1 score on a particular measure from the Time 2 score. These change

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**Table 1. Consumer Satisfaction with the ODP Program (N = 68)**

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<th>Satisfaction</th>
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<th>Somewhat Satisfied</th>
<th>Mixed/Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Very Dissatisfied</th>
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<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contest status</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncontest</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The satisfaction scale ranged from very satisfied (1) to very dissatisfied (5).*

---

**Table 2. Respondents' Ratings of Helpfulness of the ODP Program (N = 66)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Very Much</th>
<th>Much</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>A Little</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping your children deal with their feelings.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with your children's behavior.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your relationship with your children.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your relationship with your husband/wife.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you and your husband/wife deal with conflict.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you and your husband/wife communicate.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping the children out of the &quot;middle.&quot;</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working out the issues of your divorce settlement.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing you for court.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with your lawyer.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with your feelings about the divorce.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying various ways to cope.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Helpfulness ratings ranged from very much (1) to not at all (5).*

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scores then served as the dependent measures in a one-way MANOVA with treatment status as the factor (two levels —ODP participants and nonparticipants). Multivariate tests were used for each system unit analysis to help control for Type I error (e.g., parent measures were analyzed concurrently).

Group comparisons of change rates. Although ODP participants were satisfied with the program, they did not evidence better outcomes when compared to nonparticipants. Surprisingly, the change rates for participants and nonparticipants did not differ from T1 to T2 on parents’ psychoemotional well-being, psychosomatic symptomatology, stress, and most areas of social support. The one exception was that participants reduced the use of support for social needs more than nonparticipants, \( F(1,90) = 8.29, p = .005 \).

In terms of child outcomes, it was hypothesized that children would benefit from their parent’s participation in the ODP program and appear better adjusted T2 when compared to the nonparticipants’ children. This hypothesis was not supported. There were no differences between children of participants and nonparticipants on change scores for behavior problems, social competence, environmental change, receipt of social support, physical health, and most of the probomatic divorce-related beliefs. The one difference was that, compared to participants, nonparticipants reported a decline in their children’s reconciliation beliefs from T1 to T2, \( F(6, 58) = 10.62, p = .002 \).

In terms of parenting variables, none of the comparisons of change rates between participants and nonparticipants were significant at the .01 level. Parent variables assessed included indicators of overall quality of parent-child relations, coercive control behaviors, an index of household organization, and visitation patterns. Although group differences were nonsignificant, the data suggested a trend in the mean change in the length of visitation. Participants reported an increase in the length of visitation, whereas nonparticipants showed a slight decrease from T1 to T2, \( F(1, 87) = 3.72, p = .057 \).

With regard to divorcing spouse relations, mean change comparisons of participants’ and nonparticipants’ relations between divorcing spouses showed no differences in preseparation hostility, current child-rearing conflict, current competition, or current cooperation.

In sum, subjects were assessed in the areas of parent and child individual functioning, parent-child relations, and divorcing spouses’ relations before and 1 month after the ODP program (approximately 10-week period). Comparisons of participants’ and nonparticipants’ mean change scores from T1 to T2 showed few differences in the assessed areas. These few differences might have occurred given the number of statistical tests conducted.

Short-term change. Although the change rates were not related to participation status, as a total group of divorcing adults, the degree of psychosomatic symptomatology decreased during the 10 weeks of evaluation, \( F(1, 97) = 17.56, p = .000 \). The stress associated with the emotional pain of the divorce, \( F(1, 80) = 11.84, p = .001 \), and sleeping problems, \( F(1, 80) = 8.88, p = .004 \), also decreased over the 10 weeks. In addition, there was a trend for reduced child withdrawal over time, \( F(1, 72) = 3.98, p = .05 \), and reduced children’s general health, \( F(1, 65) = 4.84, p = .03 \). With regard to discussing the separation, parents reported children discussing the separation with fewer people from T1 to T2, \( F(1, 94) = 5.72, p = .026 \). Finally, over the ten weeks parents in both groups increasingly attempted to reassure their children that they would be cared for and loved, \( F(1, 76) = 319.02, p = .000 \).

**Implications for Future Programming**

**Limitations**

Before offering suggestions for future programming, it is important to identify some aspects of the evaluation methodology that may have affected the findings. There are two important points. The first is based on the finding that the ODP participants were more likely to be contesting aspects of the divorce settlement than the nonparticipants. Participants also reported more stress in the relationship with the divorcing spouse. This finding identifies the program participants as somewhat unique when compared to other divorcing couples and provides evidence that they may have particular difficulty resolving conflict. This bias is not surprising because parents who are fighting intensely about custody and visitation may be more likely to attend a divorce class to build their case for court and because their spouse may be attending and they do not want to seem comparatively indifferent in their parenting. This bias can be expected in any community-based program in which the judge strongly encourages, but does not require, program participation.

The second methodological aspect that requires attention is the low T2 response rate. The fact that only half of the participants completed the postevaluation was a concern. This concern was addressed by comparing the T2 respondents and nonrespondents on each assessment variable, using their T1 responses. The purpose of this comparison was to assess bias in the T2 sample. The comparison indicated that the T2 respondents and nonrespondents were similar in every assessment category: parent variables, child variables, parenting, and former spouse relations. Although the reasons for the low response rate are not definitely known, we attribute it to a combination of the length of the survey and the close proximity in time of the T2 assessment and many subjects’ final court date. The response rate could have been increased by administering the assessment during the last session or by paying the participants for completing the postassessment.

If funds are available, the latter approach is recommended because it does not use valuable class time for assessment and because the postassessment needs to be administered a short time after program completion to allow some time for the custodial parent to have a chance to interact with his/her children. One month was used in the present study to allow for two weekend visitations.

Based on suggested criteria for evaluation research, some evaluators might criticize the current study because of the lack of random assignment to comparison groups. We do not believe this is a critical problem because the purpose of the project was to evaluate a program in which self-selection is a critical component. The research question focused on the effectiveness of a community-based program people chose to attend. Thus, random assignment that removed the element of participant choice would threaten seriously the external validity of the design. In addition, there was also a concern about refusing intervention to interested parents and a delayed treatment-control design was not feasible because of limited staff and program funds.

In spite of these limitations, the credibility of the findings from this study is enhanced by several strengths of the research design. The sample size is large for this type of study. Few other published evaluation studies of divorcing parents have had this large of a sample. This study is unique in the detailed analysis of participants and nonparticipants. Two data sources were used (self-report survey and court records) across several variables. Also, biases due to attrition from pre- to postassessment were examined thoroughly. Finally, the assessment protocol was comprehensive and multifaceted, including several established measures of individual and family functioning, as well as consumer satisfaction.
Suggestions for Future Program Development

It is clear that very high goals were set for the ODP program. This is particularly true when some of the behaviors targeted for intervention centered on helping divorcing parents keep their children out of the middle of spousal conflicts. The evidence from this study indicated that the program did not have a statistically significant effect on changing some important parental behaviors. Why were there no differences? One plausible explanation is that it is difficult to facilitate this type of behavioral change in a large group of people in 10 hours over a 5-week period of time in a program staffed by only one trained family life educator. And even if the skills needed to change their behavior were learned, it usually takes longer than a month to change relationship patterns. Participants may have learned needed skills, but the effect of that skill training on relationship enhancement, and ultimately child well-being, may not emerge for months (i.e., sleeper effects).

Thus, an important question at this point is whether or not the goals requiring behavioral change by parents should be changed or whether the program should be modified to insure greater success with this goal. The recommendation is that the goal should be retained and the program should be modified to facilitate more directly changes in divorcing parents' behavior. This recommendation is consistent with Stolberg's (1988) framework for prevention programs for divorcing parents.

A thorough review of the children and divorce literature indicates that parental behaviors that triangulate the child in parental conflict and those that are coercive in nature have strong negative effects on children's adjustment post-divorce (Trotter, 1989). Coercive and triangulating behaviors often are used by parents who are having a difficult time managing conflict. Parental coercion (yelling, threatening, hitting) results when the parent and child are in conflict and the parent chooses to try to resolve the conflict using force. Triangulation of children results when parents address coparental conflict indirectly through the children and place the children in the middle of their fights. Both types of behavior reflect poor problem-solving skills.

The importance of conflict resolution skills becomes even more salient when the composition of ODP is considered. Remember that the ODP participants had higher levels of conflict with the divorcing spouse and rates of contesting the divorce settlement than nonparticipants. Based on these data, there is evidence that the ODP parents have more difficulty managing and resolving conflict than divorcing parents who chose not to attend. This vulnerability, in addition to the finding reported by Dasteel (1982) that people who choose to attend adult education divorce courses are unusually stressed and depressed, indicates a strong need for program components oriented toward negotiation and effective coping skills.

Thus, the major suggestions for program revision focus on strengthening sessions on parenting skills and on conflict resolution skills. The first suggestion is that there should be one or two sessions devoted solely to effective parenting skills. The focus of these sessions needs to be on teaching what coercion is, why it is not effective in the long run, and how it encourages poor adjustment in children. This discussion should be followed by identifying and role-playing alternative discipline techniques. Based on the assumption that humans learn better by doing than by listening, an extensive, experiential component would be added to these sessions. This could include both vignettes and structured homework that pose various conduct problems. These activities need to be designed to give parents practice in choosing and consistently using noncoercive discipline techniques.

A second major suggestion is that two sessions need to be devoted to addressing coparental conflict and competition. This two-session unit needs to be introduced by identifying behaviors that triangulate children. Specifically, the measures in this study that were related to children's maladjustment were (a) using the child to get personal information about the other parent, (b) trying to get the child to side with parent, and (c) saying bad things about the other parent. We call these "spies," "allies," and "denigration." Teaching parents to avoid these specific behaviors, as well as trying not to use the children as "carrier pigeons" would greatly improve children's well-being postdivorce (and would improve the quality of their own lives in the long run).

Videotapes, role play, vignettes, and homework assignments are needed to facilitate skill training in conflict management in such a limited period. A videotape needs to be designed to show a variety of incidents in which a parent engages in one of the competitive behaviors. This demonstration is important because these behaviors can occur in many different situations, with varying degrees of intensity and obviousness. Basic problem-solving and conflict resolution skills need to be modeled in the video or through role play by experienced co-learners. These then can be practiced by the participants in small groups using vignettes developed to help parents progress from solving problems that are general and not too personal to those that are specific to their unique situations. Finally, these new skills need to be practiced at home, which will require the development of structured homework experiences.

The results from the consumer satisfaction assessments provided some evidence that these revisions in the program would be well-received. Participants felt good about the program in general, and thus, seemed receptive to new ideas and suggestions for personal and relational change. They also reported needing more help dealing with conflict and with their former spouse than they received in the workshop. At a minimum, the suggested revisions would sensitize parents to the issues involved in parenting and co-parenting postdivorce and would provide them with concrete experiences and indicators of their own skill level. These participants who are unable to change their behavior over time (e.g., a few months) could seek additional counseling.

The final set of suggestions related to programs for divorcing parents address staffing. Because few educators have dealt with these issues in the divorce prevention literature, it is important to acknowledge that these suggestions are based on professional observation and experience. First, ideally the program should be co-led by a man and woman, with at least one having experienced divorce. Many of the issues postdivorce become infused with gender conflicts and are best handled by a female-male team. The ODP satisfaction ratings were lower for men than women, possibly reflecting the biases created when only a woman facilitates the program. Personal experiences with divorce facilitates quickly gaining credibility and trust with the participants. Although it is possible for nondivorced leaders to be perceived as credible by the group, it usually takes longer to establish. Second, small group leaders need to be trained to facilitate skill training. Without leadership, the participants felt awkward, got off the subject, and/or practiced the skill incorrectly. Trained leaders provide needed structure and guide the participants through exercises with added confidence. To sum up the recommendations concerning content and staffing, it may be that the effectiveness of ODP, as judged by the change rate analysis (not the satisfaction ratings, which were high), is compromised because of three primary reasons. The
program is too short (e.g., ODP is 5 weeks; Davidoff & Schiller, 1983, recommend 6 to 8); there needs to be more focused attention to specific parenting and conflict management skills; and components need to be added that are more structured, supervised, and experiential.

As an aside, our experience with the ODP program has taught us that some divorcing parents benefit from their participation with ODP and also make a valuable contribution to the group. However, ODP does not seem to benefit certain parents and these parents rarely enhance the group process (and may even be very problematic in the group). Based on these experiences, it is recommended that if the program leader has the flexibility to screen participants that they do so. We would screen out divorcing couples in which there were issues of untreated chemical dependency or abuse, as well as parents who were extremely hostile toward their former spouse. It seems that these parents need some personal therapy before community education.

Although ODP was developed for parents, this discussion should not be concluded without comment about programs for children. There does not seem to be evidence in the literature to suggest a conjoint program for parents and their children. Indeed, although they share a common family transition, parents' and children's issues and suggested intervention modalities differ. However, it seems that parallel programs are worth examining. For example, we have considered offering a children's program on the same evening as the parent program in a child care facility a few blocks from the parents' building. Part of the 2-hour block would be used for structured divorce-related activities and part of the time would be used for free play. The divorce vignette performed by the Kids on the Block puppets also could be used in the children's program. This type of dual, parallel programming for families experiencing divorce may offer several benefits, including opportunities for both parent and child intervention and child care while the parents are attending ODP. The obvious barriers include cost, adequate facilities, and the need for staff trained in normal child and adolescent development, childhood and young adult education, and divorce.

It is evident from the above discussion that high-quality prevention programs for divorcing families require substantial community support. This support needs to be in terms of awareness, acceptance, and funding. In return for this support, program planners have a responsibility to (a) develop strong, empirically grounded programs for divorcing parents and their children, (b) evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, (c) revise programs to incorporate information gained from evaluation, and (d) share their findings with other practitioners.

REFERENCES


