

# THE CONTENT OF DIVORCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

## Results of a Survey

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*A survey was conducted to assess the content coverage of more than 100 divorce education programs for parents in North America. Fifty-six percent of the programs were mandatory for at least some categories of divorcing parents. Results showed that the most intensively covered topics involved the effects of divorce on children and the benefits of parental cooperation. Moderate coverage was devoted to skills acquisition, such as conflict management and parenting, and to the effects of divorce on parents. Minimal coverage was devoted to "nuts and bolts" and legal issues. The results are discussed in terms of issues likely to emerge as a result of this content coverage.*

One of the most recent trends in services for separating and divorcing families is the spread of parent education services. First begun in the mid-1970s in Kansas (James & Roeder-Esser, 1994), parent education programs rapidly proliferated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A recent survey (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996 [this issue]) identified 541 counties being served by parent education programs.

Interest in parent education programs is spurred by several factors. One is the growing recognition of the long-term implications of postdivorce parental conflict for both families and courts. Parental conflict is often intense after divorce (Bay & Braver, 1990; Emery, 1982; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989) and has been identified in previous studies as a cause of postdivorce litigation (Kelly, 1990; Kressel et al., 1991); nonpayment of child support (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, & Sheets, 1993; Pearson & Thoennes, 1988); visitation disputes (Ahrons, 1983; Pearson & Anhalt, 1992; Fenaughty, Wolchik, & Braver, 1995); nonvisitation by the noncustodial parent (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Fogas, & Zvetina, 1991; Furstenberg, 1988; Koch & Lowery, 1984; Kurdek, 1988; Kruk, 1992); and poor child adjustment to divorce (Emery, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Johnston et al., 1989). Parent education programs represent a new approach—a preventive approach—to such problems. By focusing on the postdivorce needs of children and the consequences of parental conflict, these programs strive to reach parents before full-scale disputes emerge.

Another reason for the growing popularity of parent education services is the rise in filings by parents unrepresented by attorneys. According to a recent study of domestic relations cases in 16 courts, only 29% involved two attorneys (Goerd, 1992). Representation patterns in some judicial districts are even more extreme. For example, court officials in Phoenix, Arizona report that only 10% of filings involved two attorneys (Joel Bankes, personal communication, 1992). Indeed, problems associated with *pro per* filings are the second most frequently noted problems cited by divorce court personnel (Goerd, 1992).

Parent education programs are also attractive to jurisdictions that lack an extensive array of services such as court-connected mediation, custody evaluation, and visitation supervision. Many regard parent education as an affordable intervention. Similarly, courts with mediation and evaluation services regard parent education programs as a way to provide less expensive, mass-produced information to all parents and reserve more costly and time-consuming interventions for those parents who have more serious problems (Lehner, 1992).

Jurisdictions may also turn to parent education interventions. Some professionals contend that parents who receive orientation in divorce education programs are better prepared for mediation, are more satisfied with the services, and seem better able to consider the needs of their children in negotiating parenting arrangements (Bienenfeld, 1988). Finally, for some courts with mediation services, divorce education programs are a way to expose the divorcing population to the concept of mediation.

Because of these various promised benefits, interest in divorce education programs is proliferating at an impressive rate. As noted in Salem, Schepard, and Schlissel (1996 [this issue]), legislatures in Texas, Colorado, South Carolina, Washington, Montana, and Arizona were considering legislation in 1995 that permitted or mandated court-affiliated programs, and Utah and Connecticut already have a statewide mandate statute. Further, Blaisure and Geasler (1996) found that in excess of 12 new counties per month have begun delivering programs in the past two years. Finally, the First International Congress on Parent Education Programs, sponsored by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) in September 1994, garnered an attendance of more than 400 professionals, many of whom were seeking information to help them start programs of their own.

What has not grown as fast is a thoughtful understanding and overview of the nature of these programs. The published literature on divorce education programs largely consists of scattered reports on the characteristics of individual programs (e.g., Kramer & Washo, 1993; Lehner, 1994; Petersen & Steinman, 1994; Roeder-Esser, 1994; Schepard, 1993).

What is needed now is a careful overview or summary of the domain of presently functioning programs. Blaisure and Geasler's (1996) article in this issue provides valuable information to the field about the *structure* of programs, by cataloging state by state and county by county the characteristics of functioning programs. (See also the AFCC resource directory, titled *Parent Education Program Profiles*). Their article also characterizes the domain of programs by presenting tables that provide information about program funding, number of sessions, program authority, and so on. Missing from that report, however, was data concerning the topics covered or *content* of the programs. This information is crucial because whether divorce education programs can be effective depends critically on what is taught, on which topics receive what degree of emphasis. Further, the structures that Blaisure and Geasler studied must be evaluated against the criterion of how well they support, or are appropriate to, the content taught. For example, when making judgments about session length, program costs, and so on, these are appropriately measured against the yardstick of how much time and money are necessary to address adequately the content the program developers wish to cover.

Accordingly, a survey was developed to assess the content of existing divorce education programs in North America. The respondents to the survey instrument were primarily representatives of existing programs who were attendees at the AFCC's First International Congress. The survey instrument also obtained information about program structure, similar to that of Blaisure and Geasler (1996), to collate against the content questions. The present article presents the results of this survey and can be viewed as a companion to the Blaisure and Geasler article. It is important to note that the current database is the one from which the AFCC publication *Parent Education Program Profiles* was developed.

The issue of attendance in divorce education programs is hotly debated. Because existing programs and jurisdictions sharply vary on this dimension, it seemed important to distinguish between mandatory and voluntary programs when considering their structure and content. The tables in this article reflect this dichotomy as well as provide aggregated findings.

## METHOD

### QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUMENT

A 33-item questionnaire was developed by the authors<sup>1</sup> to profile the content of extant education programs for separated and divorcing parents.

Although developed independently, the survey instrument was highly similar to Blaisure and Geasler's (1996) survey of U.S. counties. The most important difference was that the current survey inquired in substantially greater detail about specific content areas addressed by programs.

Most items were close-ended questions for which one or more answers were to be circled. Other items required respondents to insert a number (e.g., those concerning budget) or were open ended, requiring a written response (e.g., the name of videos or books used).

The most important survey items for this study are those that inquire about 18 specific content areas (e.g., typical postdivorce reactions of parents) that parent education programs might address. Each content area was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *content area was not covered* to 5 = *intensive coverage*. Space was also provided for respondents to list two additional content areas; however, no additional content area was identified by more than two programs.

#### RESPONDENTS AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Respondents were primarily representatives of parent education programs throughout North America who attended AFCC's First International Congress on Parent Education Programs in Chicago, Illinois in the fall of 1994. Questionnaires and pencils were distributed to each person attending the luncheon ceremony. AFCC's president, Hon. Douglas McNish, asked attendees to take the first 15 minutes of the luncheon to complete the questionnaire and noted that those doing so would be represented in AFCC's forthcoming publication *Parent Education Program Profiles*. The questionnaire instructed: "Your participation is essential. If you are a representative of a presently functioning program please take the time right now to complete the survey. Your completed questionnaire will be picked up at the end of lunch."

Although nearly 400 people attended the luncheon, the actual number of program representatives is not known. Moreover, respondents were instructed to return one survey per program, and several programs sent more than one representative to the congress. Thus we cannot accurately determine the response rate. However, nearly all of those who did not complete the questionnaire reported that they did not meet the criteria described in the instructions.

To assure a complete response, the names of congress registrants were checked against the list of survey respondents. Following the congress, registrants who did not return a questionnaire were sent a follow-up letter and survey, which they were asked to complete and return.

## RESULTS

### NUMBER OF PROGRAMS

Responses were received from 102 currently functioning programs. Fifty seven (56%) of the programs have mandatory referrals for parents in one or more of the following categories: (a) previously divorced parents seeking postdivorce modifications; (b) newly divorcing parents not represented by legal counsel; (c) newly divorcing parents with disputes about custody, visitation, and so on; (d) cases set for mediation; and (e) all other newly divorcing parents with minor children (i.e., with legal counsel, no disputes). Our sample appears to differ in this respect from Blaisure and Geasler's (1996), who found a much higher proportion (80%) of programs to be court mandated. In the following tables, we report separate results for voluntary and mandatory programs.

### DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAMS

Most of the program description findings reported below are similar to Blaisure and Geasler's (1996) results. Programs are authorized to operate by local court rule, state statute, state supreme court rule, local government authorization, and informal court practice and policy. Most programs (44%) are authorized under formal local court rule. This increases to 67% of mandatory programs, whereas only 20% of the voluntary programs operate under authority of formal local court rule.

Nearly half (48%) of all programs are operated by private, nonprofit human service agencies, and another one third operate out of family or domestic relations courts and court-connected services. Mandatory programs (35%) are more likely than voluntary programs (16%) to operate out of domestic relations courts. Most programs have been in existence for a short time; 80% were in operation for 4 years or less and approximately one third for 12 months or less at the time of the survey.

There is considerable variability in the number of parents served in a typical program. Fourteen percent of programs reported serving 12 or fewer parents each month, whereas 10% reported serving more than 240. It comes as no surprise that those programs with mandatory referrals serve a larger clientele, with a median of 110 parents per month, compared to 20 parents per month for voluntary programs. Only a slight majority (59%) of mandatory programs charge parents a fee to attend. When a fee is assessed, the mean and modal amount is \$30 per parent. Almost all programs indicated that they waive fees when parents cannot afford to pay.

Eighty-eight percent of mandatory programs reported that they formally notify the court which parties actually attend following a referral. Mandatory programs naturally have greater enforcement capability than voluntary ones, with 61% reporting that enforcement mechanisms are commonly used. The two most prevalent enforcement mechanisms reported were delaying granting of the divorce and contempt of court. Most mandatory programs indicated that at least a majority of newly divorcing parents in their jurisdiction actually attend the program. However, fully one quarter could not even estimate the proportion attending.

### **IMPLEMENTING CONTENT: RELATED PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS**

There are a number of factors that should influence program content (Salem et al., 1996), and a full understanding of program content requires a brief description of these related factors. Table 1 provides some of this information.

Nearly 60% of all programs take place in one session. Seventy-six percent of mandatory programs reported holding a single session compared to 38% of voluntary programs. Relatively few programs indicated that parents typically attend together, although the number reporting "it varies" was considerable. Special provisions for cases involving domestic violence are provided by 59% of mandatory and 49% of voluntary programs.

Table 2 provides information on teaching materials and group leaders. Programs reported heavy use of supplementary materials, distributing program manuals, workbooks, a list of suggestions for further reading, handouts, or other home study material. Seventy-three percent of all programs use a videotape as part of their presentation. More mandatory programs (83%) use video than do voluntary programs (59%).

Most programs reported using two presenters at each session; however, only 15% of all programs include a live presentation by a judge, lawyer, or other legal professional. Fifty-six percent of mandatory programs reported using at least one male and one female presenter, compared to 33% of voluntary programs. More than two thirds of programs require presenters to have an advanced academic degree as well as special training in conducting divorce education programs. Mandatory programs (71%) require special training more often than voluntary programs (59%).

### **PROGRAM CONTENT**

The content of parent education programs is described in Tables 3-5. These tables indicate how much coverage respondents reported is provided for each

Table 1  
*Teaching Mechanisms Employed to Achieve Programs' Content Goals (in percentages)*

	Mandatory programs	Voluntary programs	All programs
Number of sessions			
1	76	38	58
1 or 2	15	19	15
3 - 6	6	26	17
More than 6	4	17	10
Do the two parents typically attend the program			
Together	2	15	7
Together except for alleged domestic violence	13	2	8
Separately	30	49	38
Varies	55	34	46
Make special provisions for cases involving domestic violence	59	49	55

Table 2  
*Teaching Materials and Group Leaders (in percentages)*

	Mandatory programs	Voluntary programs	All programs
What additional materials does the program provide? <sup>a</sup>			
Program manual or workbook	64	62	61
Handouts or other home study material	67	74	73
"Further reading" list	76	77	76
Other	38	21	34
Use videotape as a presentation modality	83	59	73
Use live presentation by attorneys, judges, commissioners, etc.	16	15	15
Number of group leaders usually present at each session			
1	20	25	20
1 or 2	4	5	5
2	68	58	65
More than 2	9	13	11
At least one male and at least one female presenter	56	33	46
Require presenters to have an advanced academic degree	70	73	71
Require presenters to receive special training in conducting divorce education programs	71	59	66

topic. The first three columns indicate the percentage of programs responding *no coverage*, *some coverage*, and *intensive coverage*, respectively. The last

*text continues on p. 51*

Table 3  
*Most Intensively Covered Topics (in decreasing order of average coverage for all programs)*

Topic	Percentage no coverage	Percentage some coverage	Percentage intensive coverage	Average coverage <sup>a</sup>		
				All programs	Mandated programs	Voluntary programs
Benefits of parental cooperation versus costs of parental conflict	1	30	68	4.52	4.58	4.42
Typical postdivorce reactions of children	0	49	51	4.34	4.45	4.18
Impact of "brainwashing" child, "badmouthing" other parent	1	50	49	4.29	4.48 <sup>b</sup>	4.02 <sup>b</sup>
Different reactions and needs of children of different ages	0	47	53	4.28	4.39	4.13
Responsibilities of custodials (e.g., permitting, encouraging visiting)	6	62	33	4	4.15	3.79

a. On a 1 to 5 scale in which 1 = no coverage and 5 = intensive coverage.

b. Significantly differ from one another at  $p < .05$ .



Table 4  
*Topics Covered With Moderate Intensity (in decreasing order of average coverage for all programs)*

Topic	Percentage no coverage	Percentage some coverage	Percentage intensive coverage	Average coverage <sup>a</sup>		
				All programs	Mandated programs	Voluntary programs
Conflict management skills	4	60	37	3.88	3.74	4.12
Parenting skills	4	64	32	3.82	3.84	3.78
Emotional responsibilities of noncustodials (e.g., visiting)	3	69	29	3.8	3.87	3.72
Typical postdivorce reactions of parents	0	73	27	3.8	3.92	3.63
Benefits and costs of developing a formal co-parenting plan	14	57	30	3.43	3.45	3.39
Additional community resources available for divorcing parents	7	73	20	3.27	3.38	3.11
Dispute resolution options (e.g., mediation, custody evaluation, litigation)	15	73	12	2.92	3.13	2.62
Custody options (e.g., joint, sole)	21	71	8	2.56	2.72 <sup>b</sup>	2.41 <sup>b</sup>

a. On a 1 to 5 scale in which 1 = no coverage and 5 = intensive coverage.

b. Significantly differ from one another at  $p < .05$ .

Table 5  
*Least Intensively Covered Topics (in decreasing order of average coverage for all programs)*

Topic	Percentage no coverage	Percentage some coverage	Percentage intensive coverage	Average coverage <sup>a</sup>		
				All programs	Mandated programs	Voluntary programs
Issues concerning domestic violence	22	73	5	2.41	2.38	2.44
Financial responsibilities of noncustodial parents (e.g., child support)	31	61	8	2.33	2.43	2.19
Legal rights of parents	29	67	4	2.21	2.22	2.2
"Nuts and bolts": How to properly file the legal paperwork, etc.	77	22	1	1.34	1.27	1.43
How to calculate child support under the guidelines	78	22	0	1.28	1.25	1.32

a. On a 1 to 5 scale in which 1 = no coverage and 5 = intensive coverage.

three columns report the mean coverage of each topic for all, mandatory, and voluntary programs, respectively.

Content areas in Table 3 are those most intensively covered by survey respondents. The most intensively covered content area reported is the benefits of parental cooperation and the costs of parental conflict. Other intensively covered topics include typical postdivorce reactions of children, the impact of brainwashing the child and badmouthing the other parent, different reactions and needs of children of different ages, and responsibilities of custodial parents.

Mandatory and voluntary programs are generally consistent in their content coverage; however, mandatory programs are significantly more likely to cover the impact of brainwashing and badmouthing the other parent more intensively than are voluntary programs.

The content areas in Table 4 receive moderate coverage. Some coverage is given to skill building in conflict management and parenting. Other topics in this category include emotional responsibilities of noncustodial parents; typical postdivorce reactions of parents; available community resources; dispute resolution options; and co-parenting or custody options, such as sole versus shared or joint. Mandatory programs provide significantly more intensive coverage to custody options than do voluntary programs.

The content areas in Table 5 receive only minimal coverage in the programs of survey respondents. Included in this category are legal issues such as "nuts and bolts" of a legal divorce, financial responsibilities of noncustodial parents (e.g., child support), how to calculate child support, and legal rights of parents. Issues concerning domestic violence also received relatively little attention.

## DISCUSSION

This survey was designed to provide a content overview of a rapidly developing field of practice. Goals for parent education programs that have been reported range from those that are relatively modest (e.g., provide normalizing data on the impact of divorce) to more ambitious goals (e.g., prevent or reduce children's anxiety, aggression, depression, and behavioral problems; Salem et al., 1996). The results of our survey confirm that the content of programs is oriented toward achieving this wide constellation of goals. At the same time, there was substantial consensus about coverage of topics. Rather clear themes emerged about what content is most intensively and least intensively covered.

The results also showed that providers, by and large, tailor implementation details to the content. For example, the content often focuses on emotional issues that erupt as a consequence of divorce; accordingly, the presentation staff (group leaders) have training (advanced degrees and specialized training) suitable for this content. Similarly, programs appear to focus intensively on conflict between the parents and its resulting impact on children. The fact that a near majority of programs accordingly use both a male and a female presenter at each session seems appropriate to such content.

### **INTENSIVELY COVERED CONTENT**

We found that programs appear to provide the most intensive coverage (see Table 3) to content that addresses children's needs and the impact of parents' behaviors on children. Although these content areas also affect adults, we suspect the presentations likely focus on how these items affect children. More research on program content is needed to verify this.

The attention to the needs of children is not surprising. Many providers clearly state that helping children is the overarching goal of their program. Indeed, many program names suggest just that: Cook County's (Illinois) Focus on Children and Atlanta's Children Cope With Divorce are two such examples. Providers report, anecdotally, that more than anything else, parents want information about how to help their children through divorce. By focusing on children, providers are attempting to meet the needs of parents who attend the programs. Furthermore, it may be easier to gain support for programs targeted to helping children rather than those designed for disputing parents.

### **MODERATE COVERAGE**

Moderate coverage is provided to skills and information related to parents. Most intense coverage in this category is given to conflict management and parenting skills. We question whether moderate coverage of these content areas is enough to allow parents to learn these skills adequately, especially if taught in a one-session program. Although one session may highlight important issues and provide insight and motivation to parents, it seems unlikely that it will create long-term behavior change or impart new competencies. We must note, however, that programs reported only that they addressed the issue, not that they endeavored to teach the skills. It is possible that programs only attempt to highlight the importance of these skills through lecture, discussion, or video and rely on handouts, workbooks,

or other home study material or on outside referrals to impart actual skill building. Further research is required to determine how these issues are addressed.

In this respect, it is important to recognize a possibly overlooked benefit of shorter programs: They may be highly effective in sensitizing parents to the need for additional training in lengthier courses, perhaps to acquire parenting and conflict management skills. In fact, in the only evaluation of such programs in the published literature that featured a control group, Kramer and Washo (1993) found that parents participating in short programs were significantly more likely than control group parents to voluntarily seek subsequent divorce-related professional assistance. Similarly, DeLusé, Braver, and Sandler (1995) found that 57% of parents in their one-session mandatory program indicated that they had considerable interest in participating in a specific additional lengthy (8- to 10-session) skill-building program (New Beginnings; Wolchik et al., 1993). Those who actually participated in the longer program were the ones who had the most favorable reaction to the short program.

#### **LEAST INTENSIVE COVERAGE**

Receiving the least intensive coverage in the moderate category, and continuing into the least intensive category, are content areas related to legal issues. These include dispute resolution options; custody options; financial responsibilities of noncustodial parents; legal rights of parents; "nuts and bolts," that is, how to properly file legal paperwork; and how to calculate child support under the guidelines.

The inclination to limit coverage of legal issues is not surprising. Only 15% of programs use judges, lawyers, or other legal professionals as presenters. Blaisure and Geasler (1996) found presenters are more likely to be counselors and psychologists. Providers often report avoiding legal issues so as not to concern members of the legal community or stray from their area of expertise.

Many parents, however, are concerned and confused about their interactions with the legal system, and basic legal information can help them (Schepard, 1993). We also believe that many judges, court administrators, and legislators look to education programs to help parents learn about all aspects of separation and divorce, including basic information (not advice) about the legal process. Providers would be wise to consult members of the bench and bar in their communities to discuss a component that helps parents better navigate the legal process of separation and divorce.

## DOMESTIC ABUSE

Respondents also reported that issues concerning domestic violence receive limited coverage. Advocates for battered women have expressed the concern that the message of most parent education programs is not appropriate for many victims of domestic abuse. Advocates are concerned that in an attempt to cooperate for the sake of their children, abused parents will risk their own or their children's unsafe exposure to batterers or compromise their interests in negotiation about property, child support, or custody (Frederick, 1995).

We believe that it is important that programs acknowledge and address domestic violence concerns. Many appear to have done so. Nearly 80% of programs provide at least some coverage of domestic violence issues, and 55% make "special provisions" for cases involving domestic violence. It may be that the special provisions include waivers or special referrals for cases in which a finding of domestic abuse is made. This might explain the relatively limited coverage within the program *per se*. However, we do not know what special provisions are actually offered or what presenters say about domestic abuse. Further research is needed to determine whether the concern is being addressed adequately. Providers who presently ignore this concern should consider consulting the domestic violence program in their community for assistance in being appropriately sensitive to the needs of domestic violence victims.

## MANDATORY AND VOLUNTARY ATTENDANCE POLICIES

Whether parents should be mandated to attend education programs has been the subject of much discussion (Salem et al., 1996). It is important to note that in this context, the terms *mandatory* and *voluntary* are both somewhat fluid in their meaning. The nature of a mandate varies. Some jurisdictions mandated attendance only for parents in a certain category, such as parents seeking postdivorce modifications; parents embarking on mediation; parents unable to resolve disputes about custody, visitation, and so on; or parents not represented by legal counsel. Other jurisdictions order attendance for all newly divorcing parents with minor children. Similarly, how optional "voluntary" programs actually are may be dependent on the referral source. Many putatively voluntary programs have high attendance because judges make strong "recommendations" that parents attend. This recommendation is typically taken nearly as seriously as a mandate (Schepard & Schlissel, 1995). These distinctions should be considered in any discussion of mandatory and voluntary attendance policies.

Critics of mandatory attendance do not object to parent education per se. They argue, however, that mandatory attendance creates unnecessary barriers or impediments to citizens' access to the legal system. Further, some contend that courts may lack the legal authority to compel attendance and impose sanctions on those unwilling to attend (*Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly*, 1995). In contrast, proponents of mandatory attendance contend that mandatory parent education serves the needs of children whose interests may be otherwise poorly served, that a mandate makes an important social statement, and that virtually all divorcing parents will ultimately benefit (Schepard, 1993). Furthermore, supporters of mandatory attendance point to an important research finding: Following participation in a program, a very strong majority of parents who were court ordered to attend respond that they favor making participation in parent education programs a requirement for all separating and divorcing parents (Family Division, Connecticut Superior Court, 1995; Hickey, 1994).

Perhaps the most important concern is that parents simply will not attend parent education programs unless ordered by the court to do so. Arbuthnot, Segal, Gordon, and Schneider (1994) found that even when offered a payment of \$25, only 3 of 40 parents, all of whom indicated that they wanted to attend a voluntary 2-hour program, actually showed up. We found that the median number of parents attending voluntary programs monthly was 20; the median number of those attending mandatory programs monthly was 110. Thus it appears, unsurprisingly, that mandatory programs are likely to reach a far greater number of parents than those that are voluntary.

There is a tradeoff for increased attendance. Mandatory programs are far more likely to take place in fewer sessions. More than three quarters of mandatory programs are held in a single session, whereas fully 43% of voluntary programs take place in three or more sessions. This is the case for only 10% of mandatory programs. It seems reasonable that mandatory programs should limit the number of sessions parents are required to attend.

Thus mandatory programs must address the challenge of providing services to more people in less time. Such limits necessarily restrict program content and require providers to set priorities among several potential content areas. Time limits and group size also affect instructional methods. Larger groups are more cumbersome to manage and may respond better to lectures and videotapes. These programs may not have the time necessary for extensive question-and-answer periods or interactive components offered by smaller, lengthier, voluntary programs. For example, we found that 83% of mandatory programs use videotapes compared with only 59% of voluntary programs. Future research should examine how group size, time available, and instructional methods combine to affect program effectiveness.

Although the content profiles between mandatory and voluntary programs are generally similar, a few differences are worth noting. Mandatory programs give significantly more coverage than voluntary programs to the impact of brainwashing and badmouthing and to custody options. Mandatory programs also reported more intensive coverage of other content areas related to children (e.g., typical postdivorce reactions of children, different reactions and needs of children of different ages). On the other hand, the topic of conflict management skills moves from the moderate to the most intensive category among voluntary programs.

This may indicate that voluntary programs are designed for parents who are already trying to make decisions and behave in ways that are beneficial to their children. These parents may recognize what is needed, but require help in mastering the skills that accomplish these ends. Mandatory programs, however, are designed for a more diverse audience, including highly conflictual parents and those who have limited access to information. Many of these parents require basic information about their options and about what research has shown is in the best interest of their children. Some may also require the motivation to act accordingly. Thus more intensive coverage of the needs of children seems reasonable.

It seems logical to suggest that providers would tailor programs differently to mandatory and voluntary audiences; however, more research is needed to better understand the differences.

## CONCLUSION

This study is intended as a first step to an understanding, on an aggregate level, of what content those attending education programs for separated and divorcing parents are expected to learn. Overall, children of separation and divorce are clearly a priority; parents are receiving extensive information about their needs. The limited attention provided to legal information is cause for some concern. Given the increase in *pro per* legal actions, parents are more likely than ever to find themselves without appropriate guidance. It is easy for professionals to forget that simply walking into the courthouse can be a frightening experience for many parents.

The results reported above will assuredly change. Research in parent education is relatively new and programs are just beginning to evaluate their efforts. As providers respond to evaluation results and improve their practices, changes both in program structure and content are certain to emerge. Because of the swift growth of parent education programs, it will be neces-



sary to monitor the changes in practice if we are to continue to present accurate portrayals.

## NOTE

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