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Do Parent Education Programs Promote Healthy Post-Divorce Parenting? Critical Distinctions and a Review of the Evidence

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Abstract

Most parent education programs are designed to improve child well-being following divorce by changing some aspect of parenting. However, there has been relatively little discussion of what aspects of parenting are most critical and the effectiveness of programs to change different aspects of parenting. This paper addresses these issues by: 1. Distinguishing three aspects of post-divorce parenting that have been targeted in parent education programs; 2. Reviewing evidence of the relations between each aspect of parenting and the well-being of children and; 3. Critically reviewing evidence that parent education programs have been successful in changing each aspect of post-divorce parenting.

While research has consistently shown that children who experience parental divorce are at an increased risk for a wide range of mental health, substance use and social adjustment problems (Amato, 2000; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Kline Pruett et al., 2003), it has also demonstrated that these problems are not inevitable. Despite the major disruption caused by divorce, many children adjust well while others develop serious and lasting problems. Considerable research has examined what factors differentiate those who adjust well from those who suffer lasting mental health, substance use and social adjustment problems from those who do not. This paper will focus on one factor that researchers have found to have a powerful impact on children from divorced families, parenting by the mother and father following divorce. We will first make distinctions between different aspects of parenting that have been studied, amount of time spent with the child, co-parenting between the mother and father and quality of parenting by mothers and fathers. For each aspect of parenting, we will review evidence on its relations with outcomes for children following divorce. Finally, we will review evidence concerning the effects of parent education programs to change each of these aspects of post-divorce parenting.

Quantity of Time, Co-Parenting and Quality of Parenting: Three Aspects of Post-Divorce Parenting

Quantity of time children spend with each parent following divorce

Following separation and divorce, the child's time is divided between the two parents, so that for most children, there is a decrease in the amount of contact with both parents. Amount of time each parent has with the child is a frequent focus of the conflict between divorcing parents which the court is asked to adjudicate. The division of time children spend with each parent is specified in parenting plans, which are formulated at the time of the divorce. Most often, one parent assumes the role as primary caregiver while the other is considered the "visiting parent" or nonresidential parent. The typical parenting plan is for

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children to spend every other weekend (including one or two overnights) and some holidays with the nonresidential parent (approximately 14% of time) and the rest of the time with the primary caregiver (Kelly, 2005; Kelly, 2007). Studies have shown that well-established, clear visitation schedules are most likely to be followed if they are designed and implemented immediately following the divorce or separation (Kelly, 2000). Recognition that the typical parenting plan does not take into consideration the developmental needs of the child, the quality of parenting provided by the parents, or the nature of the child's relationship with the parents (Kelly, 1994; Kelly, 2005) has led to tailoring of plans to better fit the family's needs. This change is partly in response to recent findings illustrating the inadequacy of the typical parenting plans for fostering adaptive nonresidential parent-child relationships. Several researchers have noted that children who see their nonresidential parents only biweekly report less closeness in relationships with them and greater feelings of pain in response to the divorce or separation (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008; Kelly, 2005; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007) than children who spend more time with their nonresidential parents. Furthermore, studies from the developmental literature emphasize the role that both parents play in children's social, cognitive, and psychological development (Lamb, 1997). For example, studies have shown that although the primary caregiver may spend more time with children, infants also develop strong attachments to other consistent caregivers (usually the father) and that these attachments have a positive effect on their psychological growth (Lamb, 1997).

In a recent study, Smyth (2005) delineated the patterns of visitation among separated and divorced families: approximately 6% of families implemented joint custody living arrangements; 34% of parents followed the typical division of parenting time described above, with one parent assuming primary custody; about 16% of nonresidential parents had only inconsistent daytime contact with their children, while 10% had contact with children on holidays only, 7% had contact about once every 3–6 months, and almost 26% had little or no physical contact. Recently, a shift toward extended visitation has taken place, such that children often spend a weeknight or a Sunday night with the nonresidential parent in addition to the typical schedule (Kelly, 2007).

Many factors are associated with the extent of contact between the nonresidential parent and the child. It has been noted that younger children are more likely to have regular contact with their nonresidential parent than are adolescents (Kelly, 2007). Also, nonresidential parent-child contact decreases over time since the separation. For example, Braver and O'Connell (1998) reported that between 8% and 25% of children had no contact with their nonresidential father by two to three years following divorce. Furthermore, the financial stability of the nonresidential parent is related to the level of contact with the child, such that more financially stable parents have more contact with their children (Kelly, 2007). Families who are able to negotiate their own parenting plans are more likely to implement extended visitation patterns than families who require involvement of the court to develop their parenting plans (Kelly, 1993). In situations of high interparental conflict, contact between the nonresidential parent and child tends to be greatly diminished (Whiteside, 1998; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Although the amount of contact has been the primary focus of legal disputes brought before the courts, there is mixed evidence as to whether the quantity of contact between the nonresidential parent and child per se has a substantial direct relation with children's adjustment outcomes following divorce (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Whiteside & Becker, 2000; King, 1994; Menning, 2002). An early review of research evidence found that although many of the studies on the relations between contact with the nonresidential parent and child adjustment reported a positive relation between frequency of contact and child adjustment outcomes, several studies reported a negative relation between amount of contact

and child adjustment outcomes, and 10 of the 32 studies reviewed found a nonsignificant association (Amato, 1993). However, a study that included single-mother and stepfather families found that a higher level of nonresidential father-child contact is associated with higher academic achievement, greater popularity with peers, and better psychological adjustment (e.g., Bronstein et al., 1994). Another study indicated that increased nonresidential father involvement is associated with lower rates of children's school failure one year later, controlling for earlier school performance (Menning, 2006). Specifically, children who stay overnight at their nonresidential parent's home more than the standard single night every other weekend report more positive relationships with and greater overall involvement of this parent than children who stay overnight less often or not at all (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008). And despite the belief that any relation between nonresidential father-child contact and child adjustment is accounted for solely by the payment of child support, Menning (2002) found that both financial support and father involvement are required for children's optimal educational attainment following parental divorce. In addition, a recent study found that nonresidential father-child contact is positively associated with children's physical health outcomes (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Several researchers have studied the relation between frequency of contact, father-child relationship quality, and child adjustment outcomes. Their findings have shown that the frequency of contact is indirectly associated with better child adjustment through its influence on relationship quality (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Coiro & Emery, 1998; Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; King & Sobolewski, 2006; Simons et al., 1994; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). That is, more contact is related to higher quality of parent-child relationship, which in turn is related to better child adjustment. Although there is growing support for this indirect effect model, researchers have not yet identified the aspects of increased contact that positively affect relationship quality. It may be that total amount of time with the parent is less important for the development of a high quality parent-child relationship than how the parental contacts are distributed over time (e.g., overnights during the week as well as the weekends). On the other hand, it may be that level of contact that is below some critical threshold leads to a weakening of the quality of the parent-child relationship, which leads to a decrease in the level of contact over time.

It is important to note that the impact of quantity of nonresidential parenting time on child adjustment outcomes may be affected by the nature of the relationship between the child and nonresidential parent as well as the nature of the relationship between the parents. Children who have positive relationships with their nonresidential parents may benefit from frequent contact, whereas a high level of contact may be detrimental to children who have problematic relationships with their nonresidential parent (King, 1994; Kelly, 2007). Research has also found that the nature of father-child involvement may influence the impact of amount of contact on child adjustment outcomes. For example, nonresidential parents' involvement in multiple domains of the child's life, including both school and leisure time, has been shown to have greater benefits for children's adjustment than involvement in leisure activities only (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008; Kelly, 2007; Menning, 2006; Pruett et al., 2004; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Some researchers have found that the relations between level of nonresidential parent contact and child adjustment differs for youth in divorced families where there is high vs. low conflict between the parents. In low-conflict families, high father contact is associated with better child adjustment. Conversely, in high conflict families, high contact with the non-custodial father has been found to relate to worse child adjustment (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989). Yet a more recent study suggests that the effect of non-residential father-child contact on child adjustment may be independent of inter-parental conflict, such that higher levels of contact are associated with children's positive physical health outcomes, regardless of the level of family conflict experienced in the period prior to, during, and five years following the divorce (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor

(2008) also found children's increased overnight stays with the nonresidential parent to be positively related to the quality of the parent-child relationship, regardless of the current level of interparental conflict and the level that ensued immediately following the parental separation. In sum, although there is some evidence that the amount of father-child contact is associated with better adjustment outcomes, the effects of contact per se on child adjustment outcomes vs. the nature and quality of the father-child relationship are difficult to distinguish (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Co-parenting: Sharing the parenting role following divorce

Another aspect of parenting following divorce that has been of considerable interest is co-parenting, "joint parenting," or the "parental alliance." The concept of co-parenting has been used in a variety of ways to refer either to the degree to which the ex-spouses share the parenting role including joint problem-solving and joint decisions making concerning the child's welfare (Whiteside, 1998; Sobolewski & King, 2005), low levels of conflict around parenting issues (Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Sobolewski & King, 2005), or any relationship between the parents regardless of the quality. Co-parenting is conceptualized as a separate construct from quality of the parent-child relationship. Co-parenting is also distinguished from the legal aspects of the parenting plan, which refers to the division of parenting time and of parental responsibilities. As distinct from the legal delineation of responsibility, co-parenting refers primarily to the nature and quality of the ex-spouses' interpersonal relationship as they share parenting responsibilities (Whiteside, 1998).

Researchers have characterized divorced parents into four categories of co-parenting: high levels of cooperation and low levels of conflict, modest levels of both cooperation and conflict, low levels of both cooperation and conflict, and high levels of conflict and little cooperation (Whiteside, 1998). Those who fall at the low end on the cooperation and conflict continuum are referred to as the "parallel parenting" or "disengaged" group (Sobolewski & King, 2005). A positive co-parenting relationship is characterized by a low level of interparental conflict and a high level of cooperation and communication between parents (Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Sobolewski & King, 2005), in which there is a peaceful sharing of childrearing responsibilities and a commitment to maintain harmony and to communicate a sense of respect for the other parent (Whiteside, 1998). Just over half of divorced parents report having a highly cooperative relationship with their ex-spouse (Whiteside, 1998). Only 20% of ex-spouses report experiencing continuing intense conflict with the other parent, characterized by blaming, physical and verbal attack, unclear emotional boundaries, high levels of tension, and an overall lack of resolution of problems (Whiteside, 1998; for similar conclusions see also Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

Although it is widely believed that a high level of positive co-parenting is related to better child adjustment outcomes (Ahrons, 2007; Whiteside, 1998), there is little empirical evidence concerning the specific aspects of co-parenting (i.e., high level of cooperation, low level of conflict) that lead to better child adjustment outcomes and whether co-parenting is predictive of better adjustment outcomes over and above the quality of parenting provided by both the mother and father and the level of interparental conflict. However, co-parenting is often conceptualized within a family systems model as part of a dynamic process by which parents relate to each other and to their children. From a systems perspective, thinking about how different aspects of the system (relationship between parents, contact between parents and children, quality of parenting provided by each parent) affect each other and in turn how they impact child adjustment is viewed as more useful than looking at the unique contribution of co-parenting. Sobolewski and King (2005) found support for a

model in which the level of interparental conflict was related to the level of contact between the non-residential parent and the child, which in turn predicted the quality of the relationship between the non-residential parent and the child. Similarly, Whiteside and Becker (2000) found that higher levels of cooperation between parents was related to more frequent father visitation and higher quality of father-child relationship, while higher interparental hostility was related to lower frequency of father visits and poorer quality of father-child relationships. It may be that the effects of co-parenting on child adjustment outcomes works largely through its effects on the quality of parenting received from both parents, and that this occurs within a system of ongoing mutual influence between the parents' relationship with each other, the amount of time they spend with the child, and the quality of each parent's relationship with the child.

Quality of parenting by mothers and fathers following divorce

Parenting quality is most often described as the degree to which parents utilize effective discipline and show warmth in their interactions with their children. The warmth dimension includes responsiveness, closeness, acceptance, support, encouragement, and an overall positive affective relationship between the parent and child. The discipline dimension of parenting includes the degree to which a parent monitors a child's behavior, establishes age-appropriate rules and expectations for the child, communicates these rules clearly and consistently enforces rule compliance. Quality of parenting post-divorce, particularly for the non-residential parent, also includes continued active involvement of the parent in multiple aspects of the child's lives, particularly the provision of functions that bring on a feeling of closeness such as trust, encouragement and discussion of problems (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

The combination of parental warmth, effective discipline and active involvement in the child's life, which we refer to as the quality of parenting, has been consistently linked to positive child adjustment outcomes following divorce (Wolchik et al., 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991a; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Of special concern to the divorce literature is whether the quality of parenting provided by both the father and the mother relates to child adjustment outcomes and how quality of parenting is influenced by other aspects of the family such as the quantity of time parents spend with their children and the relationship between the parents.

In the first several years following parental separation, the stressors associated with this transition result in less effective parenting by both the residential and nonresidential parents (Hetherington, 1993; 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). In the early time period following divorce, parenting is often characterized by decreased warmth, affection, and consistency and increased hostility, harsh discipline, and irritability. However, the quality of parenting typically improves after the early adjustment period. There is consistent evidence that high quality parenting, from both the residential and non-residential parent, is one of the most powerful factors protecting children from the negative effects of divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Several mechanisms through which parental warmth and active involvement of the non-residential parent impact child adjustment outcomes have been proposed, including its influence on children's self-esteem, fear of abandonment, coping and social skills (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Wolchik et al., 2002; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). It has been suggested that the effective discipline parenting dimension facilitates child adjustment outcomes by increasing children's sense of control and by decreasing their likelihood of associating with delinquent peers (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 2005). Warmth and discipline are also dynamically related in high quality parenting in that a warm parent-child relationship facilitates effective discipline by making the parent a more effective reinforcing agent. Also, the use of effective discipline strategies lowers the level of conflict between parent and child, making it easier for parents to have a warm relationship with the child.

As noted above, considerable research has demonstrated that high quality parenting by the custodial mother is associated with better post-divorce child adjustment outcomes and mitigates the negative effects of post-divorce stressors (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Amato & Keith, 1991a; Kelly & Emery, 2003). However, research on whether parenting provided by the non-custodial father positively affects child adjustment outcomes has evolved over time. Early research on the effects of fathers on children following divorce paid little attention to the quality of parenting but focused primarily on the frequency of contact between the non-residential father and children and the payment of child support. As discussed above, these studies failed to provide consistent evidence for a positive relation between frequency of father-child contact and children's adjustment outcomes (Amato, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). More recent studies have found that, similar to the findings for mothers, quality of non-custodial fathers' relationship with their children is positively related to children's adjustment outcomes. Amato and Gilbreth (1999), in a meta-analysis of 63 studies, found that the dimensions of a father-child relationship which involved feelings of closeness and authoritative parenting were significantly related to better academic success and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems, and that these positive benefits occurred across gender and age of the children. And according to Carlson (2006), using a sample of over 2,000 adolescents from a variety of family structures, father involvement partially accounted for the impact of family structure on children's adjustment, such that at very high levels, father involvement is related to lower levels of children's aggression, delinquent behavior, depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem. Fabricius & Luecken (2007) additionally found more positive father-child relationships in the period leading up to and immediately following the divorce to be related to children's better physical health outcomes in young adulthood.

One limitation of most studies of the effects of post-divorce parenting on children's adjustment is that they investigate the influence of mothers and fathers separately rather than considering them in the context of the effects of parenting by both parents. In one of the few studies to examine the joint effects of parenting of mothers and fathers, King and Sobolewski (2006) used a national sample of divorced families in which the children lived with their mothers. They found that high quality and responsive parenting of fathers and mothers had a significant relation with lower child mental health problems, even when accounting for the quality of the relationship of the other parent. They also compared adjustment outcomes of children who had a positive relationship with one parent, both parents, or neither parent. Similar to other research (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991), they found that the presence of a positive relationship with either mother or father was associated with fewer mental health problems compared to not having a close relationship with either parent.

Another critical issue concerns the effects of parenting by the non-custodial father when there is a high level of interparental conflict. Some research has indicated that in high conflict families, high contact with the non-custodial father is related to worse child adjustment outcomes (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989), but these studies did not assess the quality of parenting provided by the father. A recent study by Sandler, Miles, Cookston and Braver (2008) addressed the question of whether the quality (assessed as warmth) of the mother-child and father-child relationship related to child adjustment outcomes differently depending on the level of conflict between the parents. In predicting externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency), there was a significant main effect of mother warmth and father warmth, with both independently predicting lower levels of externalizing problems. The relations between externalizing problems and both mother and father warmth did not vary as a function of the level of conflict between the parents. In predicting internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal) however, the effects of parental warmth differed depending on the level of interparental

conflict. When there was a high level of interparental conflict, children had highest level of problems when they had a poor relationship with both their mother and father. A warm relationship with either mother or father however mitigated the effects of a poor relationship with the other parent, leading to lower internalizing problems. The authors referred to this as a “compensation” effect; high warmth provided by one parent compensated for the lack of warmth provided by the other parent. At low levels of conflict, a “facilitation effect” was found, whereby the positive effects of warmth from one parent was strongest when there was a warm relationship with the other parent, occurred. The results of this study indicate that even when there is high conflict between the parents, children benefit from high quality relationships with either their mother or father.

Summary of the Relations Between Parenting Following Divorce and Child Adjustment Outcomes

Parenting following divorce involves a complex interplay of multiple factors including the amount of time each parent spends with the child, the relationship parents have with each other and the quality of the relationship each parent has with the child. The literature concerning parenting following divorce has become considerably more sophisticated over the past couple of decades in terms of the questions that are addressed and the methods used to examine these questions. The following conclusions about this area of research are provided with the recognition that there are many gaps in our understanding of how parenting following divorce affects children’s adjustment outcomes. First, the most consistent finding from empirical studies is that the quality of parenting by both the residential and non-residential parent is significantly related to children’s post-divorce adjustment outcomes. Simply put, the quality of post-divorce parenting by both the mother and father matters for child well-being. Second, while there is also evidence that the effects of time that the nonresidential parent spends with the child and co-parenting are related to child well-being, the exact nature of these effects still need to be teased apart and there is evidence that they are at least partially accounted for by their influence on the quality of parenting. Third, there are dynamic interrelationships in which the level of conflict, cooperation between the parents, the quantity of time each parent spends with children, the quality of parenting provided by both parents influence each other and influence child well-being.

These findings have significant implications for court policies and practices concerning initial decisions on parenting time following divorce, the adjudication of disputes concerning the distribution of parenting time, and the design of parent-education programs to promote positive adjustment of children following divorce. As a manifestation of their interest in helping parents reach agreements that are in the best interests of the child, many courts have developed parent education programs for divorcing parents. We now describe and critically review these court-affiliated parent education programs. Our review addresses two questions: What aspects of parenting are these programs designed to change? What is the current state of evidence concerning whether these programs are effective in changing each aspect of post-divorce parenting? We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications for the design of future parent education programs that are most likely to improve the post-divorce well-being of children.

Parent Education Programs: Descriptions, Goals and Evaluations of Efficacy

Over the past couple of decades, there has been a proliferation of court-affiliated parent education programs (Arbuthnot, 2002; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998; Braver et al., 1996). A

survey published in the early 1990's found that parent education programs were being used by courts in only 17% of U.S. counties; by 1998, close to 50% of counties provided some form of parent education program (Geelhoed, Blaisure, & Geasler, 2001; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998). A more recent survey indicates that 46 states currently offer some version of a parent education program (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Collectively, these programs focus on accomplishing several goals including, improving some aspect of post-divorce parenting, improving parents' adjustment, understanding children's adjustment to divorce and reaching agreement on a parenting plan. In view of the research findings on the relations of quality of parenting, co-parenting and parenting time with child well-being it is particularly interesting to assess the extent to which parent education programs are focusing on each of these as a pathway to improving child well-being.

Goals of court-connected parent education programs

Most divorce education programs are short-term, lasting between two and four hours (Braver et al., 1996; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998; Hughes & Kirby, 2000). Court-connected divorce education programs differ in regard to the method of recruitment. Some programs are court-mandated or recommended by a judge, while enrollment in others is voluntary. While these programs are now widely utilized by the courts there have been relatively few published research evaluations to document their effects. Table 1 contains a description of 14 court-related parent education programs that were identified through various search engines, such as PsycInfo and Google Scholar, and through the reference sections of other published articles. We additionally searched for all papers published within the *Family Court Review* journal from 1998 through 2007. The studies presented in Table 1 include all published papers identified through this process that reported an evaluation of a court-connected parent education program. The studies vary in regard to their program goals, method of assessment, sample recruitment, outcome variables assessed, and strength of evaluation. The table includes a brief description of the program, program goals, evaluation design, method of assigning participants to different evaluation conditions, outcome measures and times at which they were assessed, and the findings from the evaluation.

These programs target multiple goals including improving aspects of parenting that we discussed above. Specifically, of the 14 studies reviewed, seven described goals related to quantity of parenting time or nonresidential parent-child contact, 13 outlined goals related to the co-parenting relationship, and seven outlined goals related to the quality of parenting or the parent-child relationship. Twelve of the programs focused on other goals, including improving parental adjustment to divorce, educating parents about divorce-related events and the impact of these events on children, maintaining child support payments, and instilling a sense of competence in regard to parenting.

Evaluation of court-affiliated parent education programs

Two critical methodological features of evaluations of court-based parent education programs are whether they use comparison groups, and how parents are assigned to the program or comparison condition. The use of comparison groups provides a necessary tool for evaluating whether any change observed can be attributed to the program rather than other factors such as the simple passage of time or the effects of repeated assessment. If the method of assigning parents to the program vs. the control conditions is random, and the data is analyzed appropriately, then a strong inference can be made that the observed changes observed in the program vs. control condition can be attributed to the effects of the program rather than some artifact. If the method of assignment is not random but involves some other difference between the conditions (e.g., those who refused participation in the program or those in a neighboring county being compared with program participants), it is called a nonequivalent control group design. Because any observed differences between

program and control participants could be due to these other differences between them, the inference that the effects are due to the program is weakened. Where there is no control or comparison condition, one cannot have confidence that any change observed in program participants are due to the program, rather than multiple other factors including the simple passage of time, the effect of giving the same measure twice, or the desire to not look bad in the eyes of the evaluator. In the evaluations reviewed in Table 1, only one study used random assignment to a program condition and a control condition; six involved a program condition being compared with a nonequivalent control group, four did not include a control group and in three evaluations, the method of assignment to program or control condition was not clearly described.

Given the importance of control groups for interpreting evaluations of programs it is unfortunate that evaluations of parenting programs do not routinely employ random control conditions. One reason which is often given for not using control groups is that courts are supposed to provide equal access to justice, and that withholding potential benefits that may occur through participation in parent education is contrary to this mandate (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998). A counter-argument to this ethical concern is that it cannot be assumed that the program in fact has a beneficial effect; many programs that are commonly delivered in communities have no effect and some have even been shown to be harmful. Thus, it cannot be said that not giving the program to a group is denying them a benefit. It can also be argued that courts have an obligation to assess whether the programs have a beneficial effect in order to justify mandating people to attend them. Finally, it can be argued that there are often limited resources to deliver programs, so that not everyone can be given the new program. The critical issue may be what is the fairest way to decide who does and does not receive the program being tested? Random assignment of people to programs is an unbiased method of determining who receives a program during the evaluation stage, and thus might be considered the fairest method of assignment. In order to make random assignment of people to conditions more palatable for courts, the comparison condition against which the new program is being tested might be the “usual program” people were receiving prior to the new program, or some low dose version of the program being evaluated.

Other important features of an evaluation of parent education programs include how well the program is described, how well the goals have been articulated, the number of participants in the evaluation and the reliability and validity of the measures used to evaluate program effects. Some courts provide only general guidelines as to what is to be presented in the program and allow the program providers great latitude in the specific content of the program that will satisfy these guidelines. Thus, there is often heterogeneity in the programs so that it is impossible to describe what is having the effect observed in the evaluation. If the goals of the program are not clearly specified it is not possible for an evaluation to assess whether the program is achieving an intended outcome (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Finally, if the evaluation has too few participants or if the measures of the outcomes are not reliable and valid, there is little likelihood that a program effect would be identified. Thus, a well-constructed program evaluation would involve a clear specification of what the program is trying to accomplish, a full description of the nature of the program that is designed to accomplish those outcomes, random assignment of a sufficient numbers of participants to the program or a comparison condition to enable the evaluation to detect the expected program effect and the use of reliable and valid measures of the outcomes. None of the studies described in Table 1 meet all of the criteria for a rigorous program evaluation. Although several studies used a comparison group, only one paper included a description of how random assignment to control and program conditions was achieved, and the small sample size of this study necessitated the pooling of the random control and non-random wait-list groups for analyses (KIDS program; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999).

One critical aspect of an evaluation is to assess the degree to which the program accomplishes its identified goals. We will organize our discussion of the programs in Table 1 in terms of whether they specify a goal of changing one of the three aspects of post-divorce parenting that we reviewed above, parenting time (contact) of the non-custodial parent, quality of parenting by the custodial and non-custodial parent and co-parenting. For all programs that identified each goal we will ask two questions. How many evaluated accomplishment of that goal? How many reported positive or negative outcomes in accomplishing that goal?

Of the seven programs that proposed to change levels of nonresidential parent-child contact, only one specifically assessed program effects on this variable (Douglas, 2004). This program did not report positive program effects to improve amount of nonresidential parent-child contact. The remaining evaluations, assessed either relitigation (which often focuses on amount of parenting time, Arbuthnot, et al., 1997; Kramer & Kowal, 1998; Homrich, Glover, & White, 2004) or parents' knowledge of new alternatives to divorce-related litigation. Only three studies (Kramer & Kowal, 1998; Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Criddle et al., 2003) reported that program participants had lower rates of divorce-related relitigation than those who did not participate in the program. However, these studies either had methodological limitations (i.e., small sample size, not describing the method of assignment of participants to program vs. control conditions (Kramer & Kowal, 1998, Arbuthnot et al., 1997), or their effects were limited to a subgroup of the population that had a higher number of children (Criddle et al., 2003).

Eleven of the 13 programs that had fostering co-parenting as a major goal included measures related to some aspect of co-parenting in their evaluation. Several of these programs used measures of conflict and cooperation (e.g. McKenry et al., 1999; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999), while other programs (e.g., McClure, 2002; Kramer & Kowal, 1998) were evaluated using court records of divorce-related relitigation. Five of these programs reported positive findings, such that parents either reported decreased interparental conflict (Shifflet & Cummings, 1999; Homrich, Glover, & White, 2004) or decreased relitigation (Arbuthonot et al., 1997; Criddle et al., 2003; Kramer & Kowal, 1998). However, limitations in the design of these evaluations (i.e., small sample sizes, failure to describe how the program and control groups were selected, non-equivalent control groups that might plausibly differ on the outcome variable) preclude drawing confident conclusions concerning whether the observed effects were due to the program.

Of the seven programs that targeted the quality of parenting, only four were evaluated using measures of parenting quality or the parent-child relationship (McKenry et al., 1999;, Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Devlin et al., 1992; Douglas, 2004). Two of these evaluations (McKenry et al., 1999; Devlin et al., 1992) reported that the program improved the quality of parenting. However, both evaluations compared program participants to a non-equivalent control group (i.e., those who were from a neighboring county or those who did not self-select to participate in the program) who might differ from the program participants in many ways other than being exposed to the program, so that strong inferences cannot be made about the effects of the program.

Twelve programs aimed to achieve goals other than changes in parenting time, quality or co-parenting; including improving parental adjustment to divorce, educating parents about the impact of divorce-related events on children, maintaining child support payments and increasing parents' sense of competence in their parenting skills. Of these goals, only parental adjustment and knowledge of the impact of divorce on children were assessed. Three programs assessed program effects on parents' adjustment following the divorce, but none of these evaluations found evidence that the program effected parental adjustment

(McKenry et al., 1999; Buehler et al., 1992; Douglas, 2004). Four programs assessed program effects on parents' knowledge of the effects of divorce on children and all four reported that program participants increased in this knowledge as compared with the comparison groups (McKenry et al., 1999; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Pedro-Carroll et al., 2001; Erickson & Ver Steegh's, 2002). Four programs evaluated parents' perceptions of skill mastery and intentions to use the skills taught in the program (Brandon, 2006; Pedro-Carroll et al., 2001; Arbuthnot et al., 1997; McIsaac & Finn, 1999). Two of these programs reported that parents perceived mastery of the skills taught and that they also were willing to incorporate the strategies into their lives outside of the class (Pedro-Carroll et al., 2001; McIsaac & Finn, 1999). While these findings do not demonstrate program effects to actually change parenting behavior they do indicate a high level of positive parental response to these programs. Consistent with these findings, all eight programs that assessed participant satisfaction with the program reported high levels of satisfaction (McKenry et al., 1999; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Brandon, 2006; Buehler et al., 1992; Pedro-Carroll et al., 2001; Erickson & Ver Steegh, 2002; McIsaac & Finn, 1999; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999).

Conclusions about the effects of court-connected parent education programs and future directions

The parent education programs are responding to needs that are recognized both by the courts and by divorcing parents themselves. However, as reviewed above, although there is a high level of satisfaction with court-connected parent education classes, there is little evidence that these programs are achieving their stated goals of improving the quantity of nonresidential parent-child contact, fostering the quality of parent-child relations by either the custodial or non-custodial parent, reducing interparental conflict, improving co-parenting, reducing relitigation or most importantly, improving outcomes for children. However, the lack of convincing evidence of program effects is due to methodological limitations in the evaluations, so that at this point it would be inappropriate to say that these programs don't work. Rather, it is more accurate to say that they have not been subject to rigorous evaluation, so that we do not know whether or not they are effective.

Despite the lack of evidence of past program effectiveness, there is reason to believe that if parent education programs are successful in changing parenting behavior they may have significant impact on the well-being of children following divorce. The most consistent and impressive evidence concerning the effects of post-divorce indicates that the quality of parenting by both the residential parent, typically the mother, and non-residential parent, typically the father is related to child adjustment following divorce (Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Sobolewski & King, 2006; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Further, there is strong evidence from several careful evaluations of randomized experimental trials with large samples that parents can be taught to improve the quality of their parenting and that such changes in quality of parenting lead to reductions in children's mental health and substance use problems and with improvements in their academic functioning. (Wolchik et al., 2002; Wolchik et al., 2000; Dawson-McClure et al., 2004; DeGarmo & Forgatch, 2005). However these programs are considerably longer (e.g. ten sessions) than programs that are typically given through the courts, and have not been delivered through the courts. For example, Wolchik et al. (2002) demonstrated program-induced improvements on a broad range of outcomes in their six year follow-up of a randomized experimental trial of a parenting program for divorced residential mothers (the New Beginnings Program). Youth whose parents participated in the New Beginnings Program, as compared to youth whose families received books about divorce adjustment, had significantly lower levels of diagnosed mental disorder, lower drug and alcohol use, fewer sexual partners, higher grade point average and higher self-esteem (Wolchik et al., 2002; Sandler, Wolchik, Winslow & Schenck, 2006). The program also had a positive effect to improve the quality of parenting

by the mothers and the effects of the program on youth's mental health were partially mediated through program- induced improvements in the quality of parenting (Tein et al., 2004; Zhou et al., 2008). There is also evidence on the positive effects of co-parenting on child well-being and at least one randomized experimental trial with a large population has demonstrated positive effects to improve co-parenting and reduce interparental conflict (Cookston, Braver, Griffin, Deluse & Miles, 2007). Thus although existing evaluations of court-related parenting education programs have not provided reliable evidence on program efficacy, there is reason to be optimistic that future refinements of parent education programs that clearly target improvements in parenting variables, particularly quality of parenting by both the custodial and non-custodial parent may lead to substantial improvements in the outcomes of children following divorce. The content of such programs can be derived from programs that have demonstrated efficacy including; a) a component to educate parents about the impact of high quality parenting by both parents and low interparental conflict, b) a component building their motivation to strengthen the quality of their parenting and to not undermine the other parent, c) active skill-building components which include modeling, role play and feedback, and d) given that most programs are relatively short in length, a way to help parents self-assess their need for more intensive work to build their skills for effective parenting and to reduce interparental conflict. An important challenge for the future is to develop collaborations between the courts and developers of evidence-based parenting programs to enable delivery of effective parent education programs and rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness to improve the well-being of children following parental divorce.

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Table 1

Evaluations of parent-education programs

Program Name and Authors	Program Description	Program Goals	Evaluation Design	Method of Assignment	Measures of Outcome and Time of Assessment	Results
PEACE Program; McKenry, P.C., Clark, K.A., & Stone, G. (1999)	One 2.5 hour seminar, mandated attendance	Improve the parent-child relationship, facilitate parents' adjustment to the custody and visitation arrangements, create a more positive coparental relationship, increase parents' knowledge regarding the impact of divorce on children's adjustment.	Program (n = 136) and control (n = 100) conditions	By county, such that divorced individuals in one county were mandated to attend the program; those in a neighboring county were not mandated, did not receive the program and thus became the control group.	Retrospective perceptions of program efficacy four years following completion of the program using self-report. Measured the nature of the co-parenting relationship, quality of the parent-child relationship, adjustment to custody/ visitation, attitude toward the nonresidential parent role, and knowledge about children following divorce.	Positive perceptions of the program and increases in the quality of the parent-child relationship. No change in any of the other measured variables.
KIDS Program; Shifflett, K., & Cummings, M. (1999)	Two sessions, two weeks apart (no session duration given)	Educate parents about children's reactions to divorce and interparental conflict, implement behavioral and attitudinal changes in parents so that they can better help their children cope with the divorce, and inform parents of more positive ways to interact with ex-spouses.	Program (n = 17), control (n = 10), waitlist (n = 12) conditions	Random assignment to program or waitlist condition; control group recruited from an existing parenting class.	All self-report. Pretest assessment of interparental conflict, knowledge about children's post-divorce adjustment, and parenting behavior; posttest assessment of knowledge about children's post-divorce adjustment, and satisfaction with the program; assessment of interparental conflict and parenting behavior one month after program registration; assessment of interparental conflict and parenting behavior one month after program completion.	Program satisfaction, decreases in interparental conflict, increase in knowledge of children's post-divorce adjustment, changes maintained at follow-ups.
Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-parenting; Brandon, D.J. (2006)	One four-hour session	Inform parents about children's adjustment to divorce and conflict and teach skills to promote children's well-being.	Only a program condition (n = 345)	Alleged random selection to program condition, but no information was given regarding how this was achieved and no parents were assigned to a control group.	All self-report. Posttest assessment of perceived behavior and attitude changes and participant satisfaction; initial follow-up assessment of cooperation with ex-spouse and behavioral	Program satisfaction at posttest but decreased satisfaction at follow-up, perception of a decrease in involving children in interparental conflict from posttest to follow-up, but an increase in conflict

Program Name and Authors	Program Description	Program Goals	Evaluation Design	Method of Assignment	Measures of Outcome and Time of Assessment	Results
					changes (3–9 months following program completion); periodic follow-up assessments for the next two years of the same variables as were assessed at the previous follow-up.	overall, perception of a decrease in resentment towards ex-spouse at posttest.
Orientation for Divorcing Parents (ODP); Buehler, C., Betz, P., Ryan, C.M., Legg, B.H., & Trotter, B.B. (1992)	Five weekly, two-hour sessions	Teach parents adaptive coping mechanisms, instill a sense of mastery, educate parents about children's post-divorce adjustment, and facilitate positive coparental communication.	Program (n = 68) and control (n = 31) conditions	Self selection to a program or questionnaire-only condition.	All self-report. Pretest assessment of parent adjustment, child adjustment, quality of parenting, and co-parenting relationship. Assessment of the same variables ten weeks following pretest assessment.	Program satisfaction, no differences between the groups in regard to parent adjustment, child adjustment, or quality of parenting. Well-being of members of both the program and control groups improved at posttest, as did child adjustment.
Your Children Forever; McClure, T.E. (2002)	One 2.5 hour session, mandated attendance	Decrease the number of petitions contested by parents following the divorce decree, foster resolution of petitions before going to trial.	Both parents attended (n = 398), one parent attended (n = 158), control condition (n = 454)	Divorced couples were ordered to attend but participation was poor; the control group was comprised of those who neglected to attend the session or were absolved of the mandate by the judge.	Used official court records. A single post-program assessment of whether any petitions involving the children were contested and the total number of contested petitions per family.	Class participation was associated with increased relitigation, as defined by contested petitions. Class participation was unrelated to the duration of interparental conflict.
Parenting for Divorced Fathers; Devlin, A.S., Brown, E.H., Beebe, J., & Parulis, E. (1992)	Six, 1.5 hour weekly sessions	Maintain paternal visitation and child support payments and increase fathers' sense of competence in regard to parenting.	Program (n = 15) and waitlist (n = 15) conditions	Self-selection to participate in the program; when all available places were filled, additional parents were placed in the waitlist and served as the control group.	All self-report. Pretest and posttest assessment of all variables, including parenting behaviors, satisfaction with being a parent, and perceived parenting competence.	Program participants experienced greater parenting competence than did control group fathers, such that these individuals reported greater effectiveness in communicating with their children. Members of both the program and control conditions maintained visitation and child support payments following the seminar. Measures of co-parenting quality did not change as a result of the seminar.
Douglas, E.M. (2004)	Information not given on program duration; mandated attendance	Improve the nonresidential father-child relationship by increasing visitation, fostering father adjustment, reducing	Program (n = 111) and control (n = 94) conditions	By county, such that divorced individuals in one county were mandated to attend the program; those in two neighboring counties were not mandated, did not receive the	All self-report. Posttest assessment of father-child contact, father involvement in various activities and decision-making, interparental	The program did not produce any significant effects on visitation, father involvement in daily activities and decision-making, fathers'

Program Name and Authors	Program Description	Program Goals	Evaluation Design	Method of Assignment	Measures of Outcome and Time of Assessment	Results
		interparental conflict, maintaining child support payments and facilitating father involvement in school, leisure time, and decision-making activities.		program and thus became the control group.	conflict, quality of the father-child relationship, and father adjustment.	adjustment, interparental conflict, or the payment of child support.
Criddle, M.N., Allgood, S.M., & Piercy, K.W. (2003)	Information not given on program duration; mandated attendance	Educate parents about the effects of interparental conflict on child well-being, increase parental cooperation, and improve parent-child relationships.	Program (n = 160) and control (n = 59) conditions	By county, such that divorced individuals in two counties were mandated to attend the program and those in four neighboring counties were not mandated, did not receive the program, and thus were selected to be the control group due to the availability of their contact information in court records.	All self-report. Posttest assessment of interparental conflict, co-parenting, and amount of litigation experienced following the divorce.	Program participation was associated with decreased interparental conflict, and it was found that as the number of children increases, class participation was increasingly associated with reduced litigation.
Assisting Children Through Transition (ACT); Pedro-Carroll, J., Nakhnikian, E., & Montes, G. (2001)	Two 3.5-hour sessions, one week apart	Educate parents about the impact of divorce on children, inform parents of alternatives to litigation, teach parents skills for reducing interparental conflict and children's exposure to such conflict	Program (n = 609) condition only	Participants were referred from courts, attorneys, mediators, mental health professionals, and self-referred.	All self-report. Pre and posttest assessment of parent perceptions of attitudes, awareness of children's needs, knowledge of conflict-reduction skills, and intentions for using the skills and alternatives to litigation taught in the program.	Program satisfaction; parents reported increased knowledge of the effects of divorce on children and the skills to reduce conflict. Parents also expressed willingness to implement the new skills and incorporate new dispute-resolution strategies as an alternative to litigation.
Erickson, S., & Ver Steegh, N. (2002)	Three 3-hour sessions, mandated attendance	Educate parents about the divorce process, the impact of parental divorce and domestic violence on children, and parental communication skills	Program (n = 70) condition only	All couples with minor children were court-ordered to attend the class. Of the 305 surveys returned, 70 were randomly selected to be used in analyses.	All self-report. Posttest assessment of parents' perception of the most useful information presented in the class, any remaining questions they wanted answered, any suggestions for class improvement, and whether or not they recommend the class.	Program satisfaction; parents reported they possessed greater knowledge of children's post-divorce needs as a result of the class and that they found information on parenting to be useful. Some suggestions for change were made but were not specified. Parents reported they would recommend the class to others.
Children First; Kramer, L., & Kowal, A. (1998)	Two 90-minute sessions	Reduce divorce-related relitigation; increase effective co-parenting	Program (n = 44) and control (n = 10) conditions	Did not describe method of assignment.	Court records and self-report measures were used. Pretest and 6 year follow-up assessments were conducted to	Since the introduction of Children First, relitigation rates have risen in the county in which the program is administered.

Program Name and Authors	Program Description	Program Goals	Evaluation Design	Method of Assignment	Measures of Outcome and Time of Assessment	Results
					measure interparental conflict and adaptive parenting.	In general, six years following the program, the control and program groups did not differ on rates of relitigation. For high-conflict families who practiced poor parenting, relitigation rates were lower for those in the program condition.
Children in the Middle; Arbuthnot, J., Kramer, K.M., & Gordon, D.A. (1997)	Single 2-hour session, mandated attendance	Reduce exposure of children to interparental conflict; reduce relitigation.	Program (n = 48) and control (n = 23) conditions	Did not describe method of assignment.	All self-report. Posttest and 6 month follow-up assessment of relitigation rates, mastery of skills taught in the class, and child well-being.	Program participants reported significantly less relitigation than those in the control condition. Program participants reported better mastery of skills than did control group participants. Skill mastery was also associated with reduced relitigation. There was no association between child well-being and relitigation rates.
Parents Beyond Conflict; McIsaac, H., & Finn, C. (1999)	Six, 2-hour classes, mandated attendance	Teach parents more effective conflict-resolution skills, educate parents about the impact of parental divorce on children, help parents resolve conflict while avoiding relitigation.	Program (n = 26) condition only	Program participants were ordered to attend the class by a judge, who determined their families to be high-conflict.	Court records and self-report data was used. Posttest assessment of participant satisfaction and two-month follow-up of implementation of skills taught in the class.	All participants rated the class as useful. The follow-up revealed that half of the participants were able to master the skills taught in the class, while half returned to the court for resolution of conflicts.
Thoennes & Pearson (1999)*	One to two sessions, ranging between 3 and 6.5 hours in length	Various goals, ranging from educating parents about child adjustment to divorce, teaching parents skills to shield children from interparental conflict, improving the co-parenting relationship, and reducing relitigation.	Program (n = 3,005 for exit questionnaires, n = 602 for follow-up phone interviews, n = 271 for court records) and control (n = 145 for follow-up phone interviews, n = 181 for court records) conditions	Only one site included a control group, but the authors did not describe the method of assignment; at all other sites, participants were court-mandated to attend.	Self-report post-test data and court records for the four years following the program were used. Various outcomes assessed, including participant satisfaction, post-program knowledge of children's reactions to divorce, perceptions of skill use, perceptions of changes in the co-parenting relationship, compliance with court orders, and relitigation rates.	Most participants were satisfied with the program. Participants reported greater knowledge of children's post-divorce adjustment and mastery of skills taught, but no effects on the co-parenting relationship or on relitigation. Participants reported slightly more consistent payment of child support than did non-participants.

Program Name and Authors	Program Description	Program Goals	Evaluation Design	Method of Assignment	Measures of Outcome and Time of Assessment	Results
The Court Care Center for Divorcing Families (CCCDF), including Cooperating for Your Kids and Focus on the Children programs; Homrich, Glover, & White (2004)	Eight weekly 2-hour sessions with a follow-up session, mandated attendance if couples are determined to have mild to moderate (Cooperating for Your Kids program) or high (Focus on the Children) conflict	Increase inter-parental communication and conflict resolution, enhance parenting skills, prevent relitigation	Cooperating for Your Kids program (n = 56) and control (n = not given); Focus on the Children program (n = 64) and control (n = not given)	Did not describe method of assignment.	All self-report. Posttest assessment of inter-parental communication and conflict. Intentions to assess child adjustment through parent report and relitigation rates through court records.	For both Cooperating for Your Kids and Focus on the Children programs, parents reported some improvement in communication with the other parent and some reductions in inter-parental conflict.

*This evaluation was conducted on parent education programs in six cities. Because the program lengths, goals, method of assignment to group, and measures of outcomes were different across programs, we summarized the range of these topics in Table 1.