

The Effectiveness of a Divorce Education Program on Father Involvement

Emily M. Douglas

ABSTRACT. Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in, and use of, divorce education programs for parents who are divorcing. While many studies have examined the long-term effectiveness of such programs, virtually no studies have exclusively focused on outcomes for divorced fathers. In this study, I compared fathers who had attended a divorce education program (because of a county mandate) with fathers who did not participate in such an intervention. All fathers had been divorced for two to four years. I assessed several different kinds of father-outcomes including contact with children, attendance at school or extracurricular activities, participation in decision-making about children's lives, post-divorce relations (with the child and mother), and adjustment to life as a divorced father. The results indicate that this particular divorce education program did not bring lasting effects for divorced fathers. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

Emily M. Douglas, PhD, is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, University of New Hampshire, Family Research Laboratory, 126 Horton Social Science Center, Durham, NH 03824 (E-mail: Emily.Douglas@unh.edu).

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Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of divorce education programs across the country. Geasler and Blaisure (1999) report that between 1994 and 1998, there was a 180% increase in the number of divorce education programs offered nationwide, growing from 541 to 1,516 programs. In addition, by 1998, forty-four states or local laws mandated attendance at a divorce education program when parents divorce. Of those states, twenty-five have accomplished this by statute; others have done this by enacting local court or administrative statutes (Clement, 1999). Divorce education programs inform divorcing parents about the potential harmful effects of divorce on children and how parents can minimize such harm. Programs range in length from one to thirty-six hours and include curriculum such as parenting plans, custody arrangements, children's reactions and adjustment to divorce, cooperative parenting, and responding to children's reactions to divorce (Geasler and Blaisure, 1999).

Paralleling the growth of this social policy has been a growth in the literature that is devoted to studying the effectiveness of divorce education programs. The majority of this research has focused on the either (1) the opinions of parents and judges about the effectiveness of the program, or (2) on the outcomes of parent interactions, parental attitudes, and children's adjustment, as rated by their parents. A brief summary of this research is provided here.

Fischer (1997) surveyed judges about their perception regarding the effectiveness of a nationwide divorce education program. In a study with a 39% response rate, judges from twenty-five states rated the divorce education program very positively. Eighty percent of the judges stated that they agreed or strongly agreed, that the program increases parents' ability to reach agreement more quickly on custody arrangements. This same percentage of respondents believed that it would lead to less litigation. A full 98% of the judges agreed or strongly agreed that the program benefits families who attend and 95% believed that participation helped to lessen the negative effects of divorce on children. These findings were echoed by a group of researchers (Arbuthnot, Segal, Gordon and Schneider, 1994) who found that 81% of judges rate divorce education programs positively and 62% rate them as extremely helpful.

In the style of Fischer's research, several other studies have reported positive outcomes using "customer service-type" evaluations. In a study

that assessed 600 parents who had been divorced for an average of four months, Petersen and Steinman (1994) found that parents were very pleased with divorce education programs. Fifty-four percent of the respondents reported that the program helped them to better understand their own feelings, 73% stated that the program helped them to understand what divorce was like for their children and 70% indicated that the seminar may make a difference in how they interact with their children about divorce.

Using a quasi-experimental method, Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) examined the outcomes of 89 parents who participated in a divorce education program and who had been divorced for about one year. Their adjustment was compared to 23 parents who did not participate in an education program and who had been divorced for roughly two years. The authors found that the treatment parents were more aware of the need to have both children involved in their children's lives and that they were less likely to make negative comments about their ex-spouse in front of their children than was the control group. However, there was no difference between the groups with regard to promoting contact between children and both of their parents, in how the parents discussed divorce with their children, in the amount of conflict between parents and in the adjustment of the children. Similar results were found by Kramer and Washo (1993) who compared parents who had participated in a divorce education program with parents who had not. Evaluating families three months after course completion, they found that there was little difference between the two groups of parents, except that parents from the control group were more likely to report triangulating behavior of their ex-spouses.

Two studies examined the potential long-term benefits of divorce education programs. Thoennes and Pearson (1999) reported that after four years there was no difference in patterns of relitigation between parents who participated in divorce education programs and parents who did not. McKenry, Clark and Stone (1999) found that four years after course completion there was no difference with regard to co-parenting, adjustment to custody or child-contact schedules, attitudes toward non-residential parents and knowledge about children post-divorce. However, parents who participated in the program reported feeling closer to their children and had a higher degree of parental satisfaction than parents who did not participate in the program.

While many studies have examined different effects of divorce education programs on family functioning, few, if any, have exclusively focused on the potential effects to the father-child relationship. In this study, I assess the effects of a particular divorce education program in New Hampshire on various levels of father involvement: (1) father-child

contact, (2) father attendance at school and extracurricular activities, (3) father participation in decision-making activities, (4) level of satisfaction with child-contact schedule, (5) level of satisfaction with post-divorce relations, (6) level of satisfaction with legal outcome, (7) adjustment to life as a divorced father, (8) level of parental conflict, (9) geographic distance between father and child and (10) child support payment. In order to assess these levels of father involvement, I compared divorced fathers in the state of New Hampshire who lived in a county with a mandated divorce education program to other divorced New Hampshire fathers who lived in two counties without such a mandate.¹ The legal mandate outlines the divorce education program as follows:

I. The seminar shall consist of the following: (a) The seminar shall be conducted by a certified family therapist or other persons certified by the superior court, to inform the parents of the best way to address problems which the children face as the result of the divorce or separation. Presenters shall be a male and a female. (b) Up to 1/2 hour of the session may be a segment on divorce options such as arbitration, mediation, and litigation.

II. The session shall be tailored to those issues concerning the children which may be of particular concern during the divorce or separation process including, but not limited to: (a) Understanding the process of divorce or separation: interaction between parent and child, areas of adjustment, and areas of concern. (b) Understanding how children react to the divorce or separation, how to spot problems, what to tell them about divorce or separation, how to keep communication open, and answering questions and concerns they may have about the process. (c) How parents can help their children during the divorce or separation: specific strategies, ideas, tools, and resources for assistance. (d) How parents can help children after the divorce or separation: new family structures, and how to deal with different sets of rules. (e) Making clear that the general goal of cooperation between parents may sometimes be inappropriate, particularly in cases of domestic violence (*New Hampshire Title XLIII Domestic Relations, Chapter 458-D:3, eff. Aug. 20, 1993*).

METHOD

This study was conducted through the use of a mail survey that was administered in October, 2000-January, 2001 to fathers who were di-

vorced between 1996 and 1998. Participants were from either Strafford County (which had a mandated divorce education program) or Sullivan and Coos Counties (which had no such mandate).

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 205 divorced fathers who were from the state of New Hampshire. Roughly half of the sample ($n = 111$) participated in a mandated divorce education program because they (or their wives) were residents of Strafford County. The rest of the sample ($n = 94$) did not participate in such a program as it was not mandated in their county residence: Sullivan or Coos Counties. All potential respondents had been divorced for two to four years and currently had minor children. There were no statistical differences between fathers from the two groups with regard to race, education, income, age of father, age of child, sex of child, geographic distance between father and child, physical custody arrangements and legal custody arrangements. There were differences between the two groups of respondents with regard to the marital status of participants and their ex-wives. Thus, these two variables (in addition to others) were controlled for during all analyses. The mean household income was 4.5 (median = 4, $SD = 1.6$) when 4 = \$30,000-\$39,000 per year. The mean level of education was 3.1 (median = 2, $SD = 1.6$) when 3 = some college/associates degree (and 2 = high school diploma). The mean age of the participants was 39.1 (median = 29, $SD = 6.8$), while the mean age of the children was 11.2 (median = 11, $SD = 4$). Fathers lived a median number of 8.5 miles from their children (mean = 419.6, $SD = 3580.2$).

Materials

I designed a mail survey for this study in which fathers reported their various levels of involvement such as, days and nights of contact, attendance at children's events, participation in decision-making, child support payments, family functioning (levels of conflict, quality of relationships), custodial arrangements and demographic information. Table 1 illustrates some of the survey questions. Because involvement can vary from child to child, even within the same family, I asked fathers to report about their eldest child only, as fathers who only have one child would not be able to report on other children. This child was termed the *target child*.

TABLE 1. Selected Survey Topic Areas and Sample Questions

| Topic Area | Survey Question |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Daily or nightly contact | Fathers were asked to check regular days and nights of contact on a four week calendar. |
| School activities | In the 1999-2000 school year, how many times did you attend or visit your target child's school for an event, such as a sporting event, school performance, volunteer activity, open house or parent-teacher conferences? (1 = None - 5 = 10 or more) |
| Extra-curricular activities | How about non-school extracurricular activities such as music lessons/concerts, dance lessons/recitals, religious activities, scouting events, etc? How many of these events have you attended in the last 12 months? (1 = None - 5 = 10 or more) |
| Decision-making about child | Sometimes when parents divorce one of the parents makes most of the decisions regarding the life of the child, such as education, medical attention, religious training and extracurricular activities. However, other times parents share these activities. Which of the following statements best describes your situation? (1 = Mom makes all, 2 = Mom makes most, 3 = Share equally, 4 = Dad makes most, 5 = Dad makes all) |
| Father-child relationship | How would you rate your level of satisfaction with the quality of the relationship that you have with your target child? (1 = Very satisfied - 5 = Not at all satisfied) |
| Father-mother relationship | How would you rate your level of satisfaction with the relationship you have with your ex-wife? (1 = Very satisfied - 5 = Not at all satisfied) |
| Conflict | How much conflict do you have with the mother of your "target" child? (1 = Very high - 5 = None) |
| Mother's support | How supportive do you think that your ex-wife is of the relationship that you have with your "target" child? (1 = Very supportive - 5 = Not at all supportive) |
| Life as divorced father | How would you describe your adjustment to life as a divorced father? (1 = Excellent - 5 = Poor) |

Procedure

Following the techniques of Dillman, (2000, 1978) between October, 2000 and January, 2001, I administered the mail survey, sending it with cover letters to non-respondents a total of three times, in addition to a reminder/thank you post card which was sent to everyone. Using this technique, I obtained a total response rate of 37% (39% = Strafford County, 38% = Coos County, 33% = Sullivan County). This is somewhat lower than Dillman reports and lower than I have obtained in previous (unpublished) research. However, divorced fathers are a difficult population to contact, furthermore, I administered the survey during the November and December holidays, which Dillman does not recommend.

Analysis

Using several different statistical analyses, including ordinary least squares regression, probit analysis and ordered probit analysis, I measured ten different areas of father involvement and father outcomes: (1) father-child contact (days and nights of contact), (2) father attendance at school and extracurricular activities, (3) father participation in decision-making activities, (4) level of satisfaction with child-contact schedule, (5) level of satisfaction with post-divorce relationships with child and ex-wife/mother), (6) level of satisfaction with legal outcome, (7) adjustment to life as a divorced father, (8) level of parental conflict, (9) geographic distance between father and child and (10) child support payment. In each analysis I examined the impact of the divorce education program on father involvement while controlling for six variables: (1) marital status of mother, (2) marital status of father, (3) father's level of income, (4) father's level of education (5) days of contact (with the exception of when this variable itself was a dependent variable, or highly correlated with a dependent variable, such as in the case of "nights of contact") and (6) physical custody.

RESULTS

Contact Between Father and Child

Using an ordinary least squares regression I examined the effect of participating in the divorce education program on father-child contact. Children whose fathers participated in the program do not spend more days [$n = 172$, R^2 adjusted = .49, $F(6, 165) = 27.91$, $p = .18$] or nights [$n = 172$, R^2 adjusted = .60, $F(6, 165) = 44.63$, $p = .37$] with their fathers than children whose fathers have not participated in the program.

Fathers' Attendance at Children's Activities

Using an ordered probit analysis, I examined whether the divorce education program resulted in a higher rate of father attendance at their children's activities. Measuring both school events [$n = 168$, $chi^2(7) = 48.78$, $p = .451$] and extracurricular activities [$n = 172$, $chi^2(7) = 36.75$, $p = .512$], I found that the divorce education program has no bearing on fathers' rates of attendance.

Fathers' Participation in Decision-Making

I used an ordered probit analysis to assess whether fathers who participated in the divorce education program are more active in decisions pertaining to their children's lives. Again, I found no difference between the groups of fathers [$n = 172$, $chi^2(7) = 185.04$, $p = .222$].

Satisfaction with Post-Divorce Relations

Through the implementation of two ordered probit analyses, I analyzed the impact of the divorce education program on how fathers rate their relationships with their children [$n = 172$, $chi^2(7) = 65.00$, $p = .84$] and their ex-wives [$n = 169$, $chi^2(7) = 8.40$, $p = .64$]. The results indicated that with regard to post-divorce relations, fathers who participated in the divorce education program did not statistically differ from fathers who did not participate in the education program.

Satisfaction with Legal Outcome

Using an ordered probit analysis, I determined that there was no difference between the two groups of fathers regarding their level of satisfaction with the outcome from their divorce [$n = 169$, $chi^2(7) = 49.18$, $p = .94$].

Adjustment to Life Post-Divorce

Fathers who participated in the divorce education program were no different from fathers who had not participated with regard to their adjustment to life after their divorce [$n = 165$, $chi^2(7) = 55.10$, $p = .44$].

Conflict

Fathers who participated in the divorce education program reported no statistical differences in the amount of conflict that they have with their ex-wives when compared with fathers who did not participate in the program [$n = 172$, $chi^2(7) = 18.47$, $p = .76$].

Fathers' Perception of Maternal Support

Fathers were asked to report on how supported they felt by the mother of their children. With regard to this variable, there were no differences between the two groups [$n = 167$, $chi^2(7) = 30.65$, $p = .26$].

Geographical Distance

Fathers in the two groups of this study not differ in the distance that they live from their children [$n = 167$, $chi^2(7) = 2.66$, $p = .58$].

Child Support Payment

A regression analysis indicated that attendance at a divorce education program is not significant a predictor of child support payment by fathers [$n = 172$, R^2 adjusted = .27, $F(6,165) = 11.79$, $p = .18$].

DISCUSSION

Since the early 1990s, divorce education programs have been implemented, in one form or another, nationwide. While these programs are favorably reviewed by parents, encouraged by social service providers and applauded by legal professionals, the research suggests that there are few lasting effects of these programs. Previous studies have determined this by examining the attitudes and interactions of parents who have participated in these programs. In this study I assessed an area that, to date, has not received in-depth attention in the evaluations of divorce education programs: the impact of attending a mandated divorce education program on divorced fathers. The results indicate that this particular divorce education program has had little, if any, impact on the lives of divorced fathers, the involvement that they have with their children, their post-divorce relations or their adjustment to life as a divorced father. These results do not greatly differ from studies performed on families several years after completion of a divorce education program.

This study has several limitations. First, performing well-controlled research on the effectiveness of social policies is always a difficult task. The “best” method of using a pre- and post-test design is often impossible, because it is difficult to know when a particular social policy will be implemented and thus, when one should collect base-line data. This limitation leaves researchers to use a “comparison group” design. Although the fathers in this study did not significantly differ in demographic information, it is possible that they differed in other ways for which I did not assess. Second, I relied on the use of self reports for assessing father behavior. One always runs the risk of obtaining inaccurate information when using self-reports. However, I do not think that this method is any *less* reliable as using data collected from ex-wives,

which has long been the standard in conducting research on divorced fathers. Third, the sample size for this study is fairly small and the response rate was fairly low, therefore one should use caution when generalizing to the population of divorced fathers. Fourth, it is possible that although not mandated, fathers in Coos and Sullivan Counties attended divorce education programs on their own—something for which I did not access. The final limitation of this study is one that is commonly shared with other studies that have focused on divorce education programs: the well-being of children. Researchers, myself included, focus on the adjustment of parents, the ability of parents to use particular coping skills or parenting techniques and the level of conflict between parents, while practically ignoring the adjustment of children.

This results of this study have raised more questions than they have answered. What is most apparent, however, is that many divorce education programs do not appear to bring lasting changes to the lives of divorced families. Practitioners who are responsible for implementing divorce education programs are urged to stay current with the literature about this social policy and to consult studies that provide guidelines about which programs appear to be most effective (i.e., Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, and Trotter, 1992; Geasler and Blaisure, 1998; Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis, and Hoza, 1998). Through the use of well-controlled research and thoughtful exploration, I hope that we can gain a better understanding of effective and lasting intervention strategies to use with divorced families.

NOTE

1. Since the fathers in this study divorced, the mandate has become statewide and all divorcing couples in the state of New Hampshire are required to participate in a divorce education program.

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