Parents Forever: Evaluation of a Divorce Education Curriculum
Jodi Dworkin and Aysem R. Karahan

Divorce has resulted in nearly ten percent of young people under age 18 living with only one parent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2003. This results in increasing numbers of children who are growing up in homes where conflict between parents is common, both before and after the marriage breakup. Understandably, this family tension can cause emotional and behavioral problems for the children unless parents take an active role in helping them adjust.

Numerous studies have found that educational programs can help parents reassure and support their children through the divorce process, thus avoiding long-term problems. One such program, Parents Forever developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, is currently being used in 60 sites across Minnesota as well as in other states. The divorce education curriculum offers parents 12 hours of instruction designed to:

- Eliminate parent conflict in front of the children,
- Keep the children out of parents’ issues,
- Provide children with access to both parents, and
- Put the best interests of the children first.

To assess the effectiveness of Parents Forever, University of Minnesota researchers obtained names of parents who participated in the class during 1998 and 1999. Researchers conducted 89 telephone interviews with parents who had completed the program in the previous six- to twelve-months. They questioned parents on the Parents Forever course topics, the course format, behavioral changes since completing the classes and their awareness of services and resources in their communities.

RESULTS

Parents answered questions about each of the Parents Forever course topics with these conclusions:

- **The impact of divorce on adults** – Parents spoke of improved communication and relationships with their ex-partners. Many described being better able to understand the ex-partner’s point of view. One participant said, “The Parents Forever classes helped me and my ex-husband in (the) ways that we can now communicate without arguing and screaming and calling each other names .... And I think it showed both of us a lot on how to control anger and how not to lash out at somebody.”

- **The impact of divorce on their children** – The most frequent theme that emerged was parents feeling better able to understand and communicate with their children and also feeling better able to keep their children out of the middle of conflicts. One parent said, “(The program helped me to) understand also that the kids are going through just as much grief (as) you are and that you need to have a lot of understanding for them and for what they are going through. And... just talk to them, and love them, and spend time with them, and still encourage them to see the other parent. Because that relationship is just as valuable as it is with you.”
• **Legal issues and the role of mediation in divorce** – Parents reported learning about child custody, child support and the role of mediation in divorce. A participant said, “They went over mediation and having a person from outside come into your life, (helping me realize) this person is here to help not just me but my children and the other parent. I thought it was great.”

• **Money issues** – Parents stated that they were better able to deal with reduced income and plan a realistic new budget. They also mentioned an increased awareness of relevant tax laws. A parent said, “I thought that the discussion of the budgeting and financial changes that occur was an eye-opener, especially for those who had never done that before.”

• **Pathways to a new life** – Participants mentioned that *Parents Forever* helped normalize their experience of divorce, and the course reminded them that others are experiencing the same thing. A participant added, “They (course facilitators) explained the different feelings you are going through and that it is normal, acknowledging that divorce is a hard thing to go through.”

Although some parents said they were not happy about being court-mandated to attend *Parents Forever*, most said they were satisfied with the group format. Others said that the course allowed them to see different perspectives on many issues that accompany divorce.

Three-fourths of *Parents Forever* participants reported that the course helped them eliminate conflict situations in front of their children. It also convinced them that providing access to both parents and putting their children’s interests first was critical. Nearly 90 percent of the participants who said they had occasionally put their children in the middle of parental issues reported that *Parents Forever* taught them not to criticize the other parent in front of the children. A similar number of that group of parents mentioned that they seldom or never use their children to carry messages to their ex-partner. Between one-third and one-half of participants also mentioned that *Parents Forever* made them more aware of such community resources as parenting classes, school counselors, financial services and mental health providers.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Certainly not all reported behavior change among *Parents Forever* participants could be attributed solely to the course. Most parents attend the course because they are court mandated to do so, but this study suggests that most parents and families do benefit from the *Parents Forever* content. Helping parents cope with divorce and support their children through the process clearly benefits families. Improved parent-child relationships at the time of divorce can help mediate the impact of divorce on children.

Among the other suggestions that came out of the *Parents Forever* evaluation were these:

* Parents attend divorce education at varying points in the divorce process and group facilitators need to be aware of differing needs of participants at different stages.
* Many divorcing parents said they would have benefited more from divorce education early in the process. Lawyers and mediators might be encouraged to recommend that their clients enroll early.
* Children might benefit from the opportunity to participate more directly in the *Parents Forever* program.
* *Parents Forever* class facilitators need training in the course curriculum, group dynamics and adult learning styles in order to maintain *Parents Forever* as a high quality, effective divorce education program.

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