

**A.C.T. – For the Children:**

**Helping Parents Foster Resilience and Protect Children from Conflict**

**In the Aftermath of a Break-up**

**By**

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Parent education classes, designed to help separating parents reduce the stress of a breakup on their children, have proliferated both nationally and statewide. The efficacy of these programs and the appropriateness of legislation or court rules to mandate attendance or to give judges the discretion to order disputing parents to attend approved programs continue to be the subjects of debate in New York State, one of the few states that does not mandate attendance locally or statewide.<sup>1</sup>

Evaluation studies indicate that these programs can effect positive changes in the lives of separating parents.<sup>2</sup> A recent article in the New York Law Journal by Professor Andrew Schepard (May 11, 2000) summarized the results of an evaluation study that assessed the effectiveness of one such parent education program, P.E.A.C.E. (Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness). The study, which is particularly valuable because it involved the use of a control group and post-program follow-up measures, found that parents were satisfied with the program and that they learned relevant information that enhanced their relationship with their children, an important factor that shapes children's adjustment over time. While these results are clearly positive and indicate that parent education programs can be an important step toward achieving healthier family relationships, the study did not find any statistically significant decrease in parent conflict nor increase in co-operative parenting.

This article is written to share the results of a recent study evaluating a skills-based parent education program: A.C.T. - For the Children\* (\*Assisting Children through Transition) in Rochester, New York. Specifically, this article summarizes a follow-up study assessing outcomes for participants at six months and one year after participating in the program. The results reported here include statistically significant

decreases in conflict between parents (especially on child-related issues), increases in effective parenting practices, decreases in the need or desire to litigate and, more importantly, increases in children's healthy adjustment.

Longitudinal studies have documented an increased risk of adverse outcomes for children of divorce, such as poor psychological adjustment, more behavioral problems, higher utilization of mental health services as adults, and higher rates of disruption in their own marriages.<sup>3</sup> However, it is important to note that these sobering negative outcomes are not inevitable because there is considerable variability in children's long-term adjustment.<sup>4</sup> Recent research has identified protective factors that promote resilience and healthy adjustment in children over time. Family-related factors such as effective parenting, healthy parent-child relationships, co-operation between parents, and encapsulated or minimal interparental conflict have all been shown to be important protective factors that influence how children fare in the aftermath of divorce.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there is evidence that the corrosive effects of protracted conflict between parents can erode parent-child relationships and negatively affect healthy parenting practices such as communication, limit setting, and monitoring of children's behavior.<sup>6</sup> Finally, some research suggests that parental co-operation is of utmost importance because parents can protect their children if they continue sound child-rearing efforts despite their differences as spouses.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, these protective factors provide an important pathway to fostering children's resilience and reducing the risk of the well-known negative outcomes associated with divorce. There is growing evidence to suggest that these factors are essential ingredients to incorporate into preventive programs that educate, support and teach specific skills for post-divorce parenting.

A.C.T.\* - For the Children is a preventive intervention program for parents based on a risk and resilience model that incorporates these various factors. It is a collaborative effort of the Children's Institute (formerly the Primary Mental Health Project) of the University of Rochester and the Seventh Judicial District of New York, as well as the mental health, legal, judicial and mediation communities. Parents come to the program through a variety of referral sources: 30% from Family Court; 23% Supreme Court; 47% from non-court referral resources including mental health professionals, physicians, lawyers, mediators, school counselors, and self-referrals.

The program model is unique in that it is taught in 2-3 ½ hour segments scheduled one week apart with 5 ½ hours of the program spent on providing information on children's developmental and emotional needs and the importance of reducing stress on the children and keeping them out of the middle of the parents' conflict. Effective parenting practices and ways to strengthen the relationship between the children and both parents are emphasized. Strategies are taught for renegotiating the parents' relationship and developing skills for effective communication, creative problem solving, anger control and conflict management, with an additional hour devoted to small group sessions in which the parents practice these skills. Only 30 minutes of the program are devoted to reviewing relevant legal issues such as the terminology used in matters of child custody, considerations in choosing litigation vs. negotiation, factors considered by a judge in making a custody determination as well as court appointed people who may assist in the process, (e.g., law guardian, psychological evaluator), the purpose of child support and the importance of following court orders. The practical experiences of the attorney and judge making the presentation are considered as well.

The format is open and parents can ask questions of the presenters and engage in limited dialogue with each other on a given issue or topic. However, the program is not mediation or counseling and is not designed to give advice on specific cases or to resolve individual disputes, messages which are clearly conveyed to the parent participants. While A.C.T. - For the Children operates on the premise that in most cases it is in the best interests of the children that parents engage in cooperative post-divorce parenting, it recognizes that this is not always appropriate, as for instance, when domestic violence and/or child abuse are present. These cases are screened from the program. Parents who present with these issues are referred to appropriate services.

A unique aspect of this program is the skills training component which provides practical techniques found in the research literature to be related to better outcomes for children, such as protecting children from the toxic effects of ongoing conflict. Participants are engaged in problem-solving more productive ways of handling conflict-ridden situations involving children through video vignettes and role playing with presenters.

Although discussion of skills is helpful, actually practicing and applying them to real life scenarios is even more effective. The presenters first discuss ways of handling anger and conflict constructively, including communication skills and generating solutions to problems. Parents are then given the opportunity in a one-hour small group setting at the conclusion of the program to practice these skills and techniques. At the end of the program, an overwhelming majority of parents report that they intend to use these skills. A follow up study was necessary to address the key question of whether their good intentions were translated into behavior changes that could in turn positively

affect their children.

## FOLLOW-UP STUDY

The follow-up study was conducted via telephone interviews with 85 randomly selected program participants who had completed the program; 67% of participants were contacted six months after program completion, and 33% were interviewed between 12 and 15 months after attending the program. The structured interviews averaged 50 minutes in length and were conducted by mental health professionals at the University of Rochester's Children's Institute. It was made clear to participants that their responses would be kept confidential and would not be conveyed to the court or to attorneys, or in any way impact litigation in which they may be involved. It is noteworthy that only one person declined the interview; the majority were quite receptive to participating.

## RESULTS

Key results from the follow-up study indicate that the skills parents learned in the program were: (1) actually being utilized and (2) resulted in highly significant decreases in the amount of child-related conflict between parents six months and one year after participating in the program.

### Reductions in Conflict:

Before participating in the program, 66% of the follow-up sample reported high or very high levels of conflict. At follow-up, those figures dropped to 14%, a statistically significant reduction. Ninety-nine percent of participants report that they learned valuable approaches for supporting children and keeping them out of the middle of conflict. Results of the follow-up study strongly suggest that the benefits parents report

immediately after attending the program are still evident six months and one year later. Asking parents to change deeply rooted negative patterns of relating to each other is a tall order. Yet at follow-up, a significant number of participants reported that they were consistently using the skills taught in the program:

- 97% reported that they "almost always" keep their children out of the middle of parental arguments.
- 96% avoid criticizing their former partner in front of their children.
- 93% use a problem solving approach to conflict.
- 97% stick to their agreements, or request change in a businesslike way.

Perhaps most importantly, reductions in parent conflict were correlated with important indices of child well being, including:

- Reductions in children's anger and acting-out behavior
- Decreases in children's sadness and depression
- Increases in children's positive adjustment to the post-divorce family.

#### Parent-Child Relationships

The study also assessed whether there were any changes on indicators of healthy family functioning and parent-child relationships. On a measure of healthy family functioning, 88% of participants report that their family functioning is better at follow-up than before participating in the program. The follow-up study also revealed significant changes on a number of other measures of healthy family functioning and enhanced parent-child relationships, including:

- 93% of parents report improved relationships with their children;
- 90% report improvements in their ability to help their children through the stresses of separation/divorce;

- 92% report being better able to communicate with their children and listen to their concerns more effectively;
- 97% say they are better able to protect their children from parental conflict;
- 91% report having more hope for their family's future;
- 95% report being better able to focus on their children and not their former partner;
- 85% of parents report an improved, healthier atmosphere in their family;
- 97% report they are much more aware of how harmful continued conflict is on their children.

Again, parents' avoidance of behaviors that put children at risk resulted in better child outcomes. Specifically, efforts to protect children from being caught in the middle of parent conflicts and to avoid sending messages via children were correlated with better school adjustment, higher academic performance, less anger, and fewer somatic symptoms in children. Likewise, parental use of effective communication ("I messages"), and a businesslike approach was correlated with children's enhanced school adjustment, increased talking with parents about their feelings, fewer reports of headaches and stomachaches, and better adjustment to family changes.

#### Enhancing Children's Adjustment

The follow-up study also asked parents about their children's functioning at home, at school and their adjustment to family changes since participation in the program. While there were significant improvements in children's adjustment, it is interesting to note that parents who did not want the breakup were more likely to rate their children as having more problems than those who initiated or arrived mutually at

the decision to separate. Regardless of that tendency, the following positive outcomes were found for children at follow-up:

- 80% of children showed better adjustment to family changes;
- 75% of children were less depressed or withdrawn;
- 80% showed improvements in their general school adjustment;
- 78% of children have more involvement in healthy activities; and
- 84% of children were better able to talk about feelings related to their families.<sup>8</sup>

## LITIGATION RATES

Furthermore, the study found that the program had an effect on legal outcomes and parents' attitudes about litigation. For example, before the program, 54% of parents reported that they were definitely likely to litigate (and, in fact, were in some phase of legal action). Participants showed significant decreases in their proclivity to litigate at follow up: only ten percent of participants reported that they were actually litigating, or were likely to in the near future. Overall, 80 % of the follow-up sample reported a decrease in the level of conflict since participating in the program;<sup>9</sup> 76% of parents report that they were able to negotiate an amicable settlement regarding time sharing/residence; and 74% were able to settle child custody disputes.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Parent education programs, based on factors known to protect children from the risk of ongoing conflict and impaired parent-child relationships, hold much potential for enhancing post divorce parenting. Results of this follow-up study demonstrate that the benefits parents reported immediately after attending the program are still evident six

months and one year later. It is especially noteworthy that an overwhelming majority of participating men and women cited the skills portion of the program as having had the most enduring impact. Based on the research, it appears that skills for reducing conflict and increasing effective parenting are important pathways to healthier child outcomes. While these results are encouraging, it is recognized that the lack of a control group presents a limitation in this study. Future studies need to address this shortcoming. Nevertheless, when viewed in light of the magnitude of the results, and in light of other studies with similar findings, there is room for optimism. In sum, results of program evaluation outcomes to date strongly suggest that skill-based parent education programs hold promise for reducing interparental conflict and fostering children's resilience and healthy adjustment. Hopefully, preventive outreach for children and families will become a priority for health care and social policy. Prevention programs which focus on factors known to promote health and resilience are a promising part of that vision of wellness.

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8. A child of parents who used the skills learned in A.C.T. to resolve their disputes commented: "I can see a big difference. They can talk to each other now without yelling. That helps a lot.... My stomach doesn't hurt as much and I can concentrate better in school."
  
9. The following comments are typical of those reported by program participants: " I was looking for a class like this two years ago. I'm very glad to see one available. I think all parents should be required to attend this class at the beginning of their conflicts. Mine has been going on for four years and my daughter's father and I may not have done things the same way had we had this class available to us years ago. I think this program should be available to everyone with children. I believe it would prevent the damage of divorce on innocent children."
  
10. Divorced parents whose parenting relationship had deteriorated prior to the program commented: "That program (A.C.T. - For the Children) changed our lives. It gave us all a new direction--one of hope and healing. I see too many people oozing with anger. I don't want to go there anymore..." (Mom) "Excellent program--the message of hope and rebuilding a positive parenting relationship is so important. It gave me my daughter back. I can't tell you how good it feels to wake up and see her face in the morning." (Dad)

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