

# EVALUATION OF THE LONG TERM EFFECTS OF ONLINE PARENTING PROGRAMS

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Many counties across the United States require a co-parenting program to be taken prior to finalizing a separation or divorce when children are involved. Educators considered the internet as a method of delivering their programs as approximately 66 percent of adults in the United States use the internet according to Pew Research. Taking an online program appears to be a great option for families. Additionally, online programs are a viable option for divorcing or separating parents because this segment often experience a loss of resources (e.g., time, money, child care), which make it difficult to attend traditional programs (face-to-face) (Bowers, Mitchell, Hardesty, & Hughes, 2011). Existing online programs have not been formally researched, thus, we do not readily understand the effectiveness of these programs and their impact on divorcing or separating families over time. This study was designed to assess participant's assessment of their own knowledge, attitude, and behavior at three months and six months after the completion of an online parenting program.

**Keywords:** *divorce, divorce education; evaluation; online program; technology*

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## CO PARENTING KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS

Divorce education scholars have defined *knowledge* in this paper as “gaining new insights” with the content of a program designed to educate divorcing or separating parents (Brandon, 2006). For example, Wallerstein and Kelly (1996) revealed that parents still experienced negative emotions (e.g., “anger, humiliation, and rejection”; p. 5) 18 months after their divorce. In a co-parenting education class parents could gain a general understanding of what to expect from their children, comprehending how their children think of divorce, or understanding new ways to communicate with their co-parent. In general, the goal of co-parenting education classes is to help parents gain knowledge that they did not know before about co-parenting during and after separation or divorce.

For this paper, we define *attitude* as a way of approaching a situation. Another way to look at attitude would be the combination of emotions and thoughts when first approached with a divorce or separation situation. With regards to co-parenting education, parents may approach situations with conflict for example in a different manor then before after this change in attitude from this course. Multiple studies have also shown a direct correlation between parent's relationships and the child's psychological adjustment to the divorce (Ahrns, 1980). This is proof on the importance of this program and helping parenting change their attitudes towards each other to help themselves, and their children throughout life.

*Behavior* has been defined as a new motivation to help the environment (Hungerfod & Volk, 1990). The environment in this study is the home environment, which is where many co-parenting interactions take place, which includes parenting of the child and interacting with the child and his or her other parent. Online parenting programs provide parents' strategies for fostering cooperative communication and conflict management in their home environment and co-parenting relationship at large. Promoting positive co-parenting behaviors is important because divorce scholars have found that children experience the most problems when conflict or negative communicative behaviors are high among co-parents (e.g., when at least one of the co-parents badmouth or verbally abuse the other; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996).

Conceptually, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of divorcing or separating parents are linked. Beginning with knowledge, once knowledge is gained it can then affect a parent's attitude by applying the new knowledge to their own thoughts. This leads to a direct change in their behavior as they approach the next situation with their parent differently due to the knowledge gained and the attitude shift that has taken place. An attitude change can be seen when individuals feel concern for the environment and are motivated to participate in improvement of it (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). This is why knowledge, attitude, and behavior changes are so important and a main component Online Parenting Programs tries to capture with each participant.

The data that was collected pointed to many different participants going through this behavioral model and in turn benefiting them and their children. Since there is currently no way that Online Parenting Programs can view if participants absorb knowledge and change their attitudes and alter their behaviors, we have put forth a small exploratory research project to see in three months and six months what exactly participants took away from the program and how it has affected their lives.

### **Goals of Present Study**

To address these research questions, we wanted to explore how parents' perceptions of their attitudes, knowledge and behavior changed over time. As such, we assessed parents' attitudes, knowledge, and behavior at 3 and 6 months after they participated in the co-parenting education class. Specifically, we wanted to explore participants' recollections of the content and instructional design that they believe had the most impact on their attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors.

## **METHODS**

We conducted semi-structured telephone interviews. Prior to conducting interviews, initial interview questions were reviewed by two professionals who have advanced degrees and expertise in divorce education, initial interview questions were revised based on their responses; see Appendix A for final interview guide. Although we consistently followed the interview guide for each phone call, this qualitative methodology allowed for flexibility among participants' responses. All data were audio recorded and transcribed.

## **PROCEDURE**

Parents were recruited by using the backend of Online Parenting Programs and filtering them by three months and six months and having an even split of males and females. After calls were not answered or participants refused to answer, we would continue to go down the list from the backend program. The next step was to come to the conclusion on how to distribute this interview to parents who have taken the program and generate a random sample. As a way to reach participants more directly the decision was made to set up phone interviews with these participants to be done by a worker from Online Parenting Programs. Phone interviews decrease research costs and allow for larger geographical access to research subjects (Chapple 1999; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Sweet, 2002). There were no incentives offered in this program, just the participants' input to changes or comments about the program. Participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they would be recorded and be participating in a brief interview (10-15 minutes), once this was agreed upon; we began with the interview protocol. After all interviews the coding process entailed finding quotes from the 50 person sample and fitting them into the

three patterns that were seen, knowledge gained, attitude changed, and behavioral changes.

Phone interviews help with privacy issues in such a sensitive subject of divorce and the strong emotions connected to this. Concurrently, telephone interviews are viewed as a valid way of collecting data and cite. After this process was completed, each participant's responses were transcribed and recorded in our data folder.

## PARTICIPANTS

Although our initial goal was to collect 25 participants from a six month group and 25 from a three month group, our final sample would be determined based on theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss 1990). Thus, if new themes were still emerging after we collected data from these initial participants (n = 50), then we would continue to recruit participants. However, this was not the case. In fact, no new themes emerged after collecting data from 30 participants. However, we continued to collect data to validate and confirm accuracy of analysis of the initial participants.

These participants were geographically diverse, from both groups there was 34 percent of the sample from the Midwest, 10 percent from the east coast, 8 percent from the southeast, 4 percent from the northwest, 30 percent from the west coast, and 14 percent from the southwest region. To see specifics from participants see Table 1. The sample included all English speaking participants even though Online Parenting Programs does offer a Spanish version of their course. All but 2 participants in the six month group took the 4 hour co parenting class (other classes were 4 hour parenting during divorce class). In the three month group, all but four participants didn't take the 4 hour co parenting class. The four who did not, took 8 hour parenting skills, a four hour parenting during divorce class, a six hour co-parenting class, or a 12 hour co parenting class. This diversity in our sample gave us the best chance to collect the most accurate data. While conducting these phone interviews, awareness had to be given that not everyone would be willing to complete the interview or answer the phone, yet after two months of this process, 25 from each group was finally recorded and transcribed, leaving us with our research questions answered.

**Table 1**

Demographics	Three Months (N=25)	Six Month (N=25)
Male	56%	60%
Female	44%	40%
Children under the age of 5	52%	56%
Children over the age of 5	48%	44%

## RESULTS

Many participants reported that specific aspects of the online parenting program content or instructional processes helped them cope with separation or divorce. In this section, we discuss parents' perceptions of the ways that this online parenting program content and instructional process increased their knowledge or changed their attitudes or behaviors throughout this process. We also look at participants' recommendations for program improvement. We will close with participants' responses regarding the program characteristics (program content and instructional design)

### **Knowledge Gained from Program**

The knowledge that many participants (n=7) appeared to gain was knowledge regarding their children and interacting with them. For example, Kelly said she gained an understanding of how to cope when her child asked about why she and the child's father were no longer together. Participants' reported learning how to communicate with the child and what to say (or not) in front of them such as Keith discussing how the program "Made it a little easier to communicate". Many also gained knowledge on how to ease the tension with their children by, "Not talking bad in front of my child at any time" (Bill), hoping it will help their relationship. Others described the importance of not "Using the children as messengers" (Arnold). A pattern we observed was parents described their new found knowledge on "not badmouthing the parent" and how this helped their relationship with their children. The other pattern was the knowledge participants gained with their communication with their co-parent, which is a vital part of *Online Parenting Programs*, and a topic many participants discussed (n=6). After being asked what information covered in the program helped them with their interactions with their co-parent many described how they could now be, "Incorporating some of the communication tactics" (Tia) or as one participant put it, "It has educated me a little bit on the ways to deal with the parent about the divorce" (Marcelloe).

Other participants went on to described how they applied the knowledge they gained after completing the program. For example, Terrisa said it was, "Something that you can walk away with all of this information on all of these steps you can use and go back to". Like Terrisa, many participants talked about how the knowledge they gained changed their attitudes and behaviors. Another approach gained from Online Parenting Programs was how some things were "worded and how you can say certain things to sound less confrontational" (Jen). She discussed this when describing her communication with her co-parent about subjects that used to be confrontation between them but have since become much better. Another parent went on to talk in detail about the program and how he knows he will be "using the tools and applying them" (Randall) while mentioning his co-parent and the program.

As with any program, negative responses also occurred. There were those that claimed the program was a waste of their time or was something they already knew. Many participants described how the class, "basically tells you things you should know", but does go on to say, "but if you don't know, it's a damn good class (Bob). Jack described how the class seemed like common sense to him, yet he says, "I think that most people realize that it is common sense before they get caught up in the emotion of it, but it just helps to have that reminder"

About 15 percent of participants associated the program with some sort of common sense. Parents specifically defined common sense as, "Something people should already know." (Pete). Many of those who considered some of the content to be common sense said that the program still did help them because it was "a good reminder of how to be civil" (Jill). Others who claimed the program helped them even though the content was information they already knew described how the program helped to normalize the situation for them. For example, Jennifer said, "It just helps to have that reminder when your entire world is falling apart, that is not just about you." These participants all showed that even though they recognized some of the content as common sense, they still appeared to find it helpful and still acknowledged that it was still beneficial to take the class and have the information re-iterated to them. There were a select few who thought the program was a "waste of time" (Joe) or "only took the class because it was mandated" (Jon). Yet these opinions were only a small portion of the entire sample and many also seemed frustrated with the program only after they found out their county would not accept this particular class.

### **Attitude Change from Program**

Similar to patterns in knowledge gains, participants reported experiencing changes in attitudes regarding parenting and interactions with their co-parent. However, participants' reported more attitude changes regarding interactions with the co-parent than they reported attitude changes regarding parenting at large. Susan stated that she "left with a bit more introspective and thinking about myself and what is going with me and not inserting that into the interactions I have".

Parents appeared to show enthusiasm when talking about their children. One parent discusses how she now tries, "to see it from my child's perspective" (Yana). Another parent discussed how it, "kind of changed my vision." (Melissa) when describing her approach to her divorce overall. In a more general fashion, participants seemed to gain confidence during this process as well (n=4), which is very important while taking any divorce education program. Elliot said that the program content gave him confidence in what he was "already doing" as a parent. Like Elliot, many parents also discussed this topic on how the program gave them confidence by confirming that what they were doing was right. Many parents described their attitudes towards their co-parent was the main attitude change that took place after completion of the program.

### **Behavior Change from Program**

One of the first noticeable patterns in the interviews with behavior seemed to be changing behavior in front of children. Out of the 21 quotes recorded in the Behavior codebook, half of them were discussing children (n=11). The majority of these parents discussed changing how they interact with their children from before they took the program to after. For example, Kathleen said one thing she does as a result of the program was not asking the child about things he/she "does at the other parent's house". Many parents' reports of behavior changes echoed Elliot's, who said, after completion of the program, he learned to "leave the kids out of it."

Another behavioral pattern seen was how to cooperatively communicate with their co-parent. For example, Darwin discussed this general progress when he discusses how he and his co-parent are now able to discuss issues calmly "instead of bickering about it". Lucy also describes this process when she now views her relationship with her co-parent as a "business partnership" which has helped her to avoid conflicts. Sending e-mails also seemed to be a popular take away practice from the program, "I can e-mail her instead of having to respond right away" says Jordan while describing his new communication skills with his co-parent learned from Online Parenting Programs.

### **Individual Differences**

Breaking up the data upon gender we found no data that suggested males or females were more affected or remembered more from completing Online Parenting Programs. We also observed after splitting up data into parents who had children under the age of 5, and those who had children over, there was no patterns detected in these groups. There were also no patterns while looking at geographical location of the participants throughout the United States.

### **Program Characteristics**

The specific characteristics of this online program did have an effect on what people were able to remember from the program. Grace mentions how the accessibility of the program helped her take away more information; she describes the benefits of the program being online. She says, "being able to focus

on it when I did have the time to do it, especially with having a child.” Another participant enjoyed “reading each chapter and writing a journal entry about it” as instructed on the program, he appeared to be very passionate about this exercise and its help with remembering items from the course.

Delivery of content plays a vital role in the success of *Online Parenting Programs*. “I enjoyed how I can go back and forth through the program and go back to certain topics” (Susan). Participants reported advantages of being able to take the program online as being able to access the content at different times and the opportunities presented by different learning styles. For example, many enjoyed the video portion of the program; Yana enjoyed the videos because as she says, “I am a visual person.” Daniel mentions the same positives with videos calling them “great” and going onto to discuss how they helped him “step by step understand the material.” Multiple other participants mentioned the same video concept saying “It was good to see the content in action” (Paula). One passionate participant described the videos as making the material “more alive to me” (Carl). These responses were prominent in many of the interviews. One participant sums up many parents thought on this, while discussing what they enjoyed, “The video’s because I am a visual person” (George).

Many other participants particularly seemed to enjoy the life applications that were presented in the program. These were exercises made to apply to one’s own life. One participant describes them as “a way to see the content in a real life situation” (Will). Another participant described life applications as “very informative and more helpful than anything” (Dirk). In particular, there were multiple mentions of the “How Kids Think Section.” Carla describes how she enjoyed this and thought it “was good to see how her child thought”. Susan does a great job at expressing overall what others thought by describing life applications as how they “just made me interact with the material and think about it rather than just be a passive observer.”

Overall, in the 50 person sample, not a single person questioned the reliability of the content presented as anything but factual which was a major benefit showing the rich factual content presented in *Online Parenting Programs*.

## **Discussion**

Originally, we hypothesized the biggest factor to play a role was if participants remembered information from Online Parenting Programs and if they had children under five, and also we hypothesized that we would see a pattern that females would recollect more. What we found was something very different. After splitting data up into children under the age of five, over the age of five, gender, and three and six month, the only pattern was if participants were dealing with a tough situation with their co-parent which we defined as a high-conflict divorce. These participants likely had daily or weekly interactions with their co-parent regarding issues in the divorce. When parents had to deal with issues regarding co-parents on a routine basis they were able to cite the information that they learned from this program and therefore remembered it better, no matter what the time was (three month or six month). This information is very important because it shows that parents did take something away from the program and it truly did help them through what many would say is a tough family situation.

Many also referenced confidence being gained from taking *Online Parenting Programs*, this is vital to the goals of this program because during such an emotional time such as a divorce, building confidence could cause a ripple effect all through participant’s lives. We also found that parents truly did like the video aspect of the program as it seemed to be a break in all the content offered on the program. Many also enjoyed the program being online and having the ability to log on and complete the class when they had time. This representing advancement in bridging the gap of technology and research offered to

consumers. Even through all of the benefits this program showed after data collection there was also many limitations to this study.

## **Limitations**

There are many limitations that could be addressed in future data collection on programs like this. Firstly, a bigger sample would have been ideal. Collecting 50 people total was ok for a random small sample, but having a bigger sample might be able to show more patterns in data and also get more people's experiences with the program. Due to the fact that these were phone interviews we were not able to get as big of a sample as we would have liked since many either had changed their numbers or did not pick up their phones. Another limitation with phone interviews was that we were not able to capture facial expressions or other non-voice recognizable cues on what they thought of the program. If these participants could have been interviewed face to face, a more in depth interview could have occurred which would have led to more data being collected.

Another limitation to this research was we were not able to go further than six months with our group due to a lot of participants changing phone numbers or not wanting to discuss such a personal time in their lives with us so far after their separation has occurred.

Our final limitation was that we did not have a control group to compare this group to. If we were able to compare our results to a control group who did not take our class we would have a much better understanding how effective Online Parenting Programs truly is to its participants.

## **Future Recommendation**

In the future Online Parenting Programs and other programs should offer a similar pre/posttest evaluation in order to accurately gauge the difference the program is making in participants lives. Also, many participants included that even though they enjoyed the videos, many felt that they needed to be higher quality and have a more realistic feel to them for participants to connect to them more. A great way to help with getting feedback earlier and more often would be implementing before every new section an interactive survey so participants could voice their opinions on what they enjoyed on the section and what they would like to see different with the program. Another future direction that should be implemented is a possible phone App for Online Parenting Programs for people who utilize their phones often. With an App, participants could truly access the course from anywhere.

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