



Relational conflict and outcomes from an online divorce education program



Sarah Cronin^{a,*}, Emily H. Becher^b, Ellie McCann^b, Jenifer McGuire^c, Sharon Powell^b

^a Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, 56 E River Rd, Minneapolis, MN, 55455, USA

^b University of Minnesota Extension, 1420 Eckles Ave, Coffey Hall Room 495, Saint Paul, MN 55108, USA

^c Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota Twin Cities, 1985 Buford Ave, Saint Paul, MN, 55108, USA

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ABSTRACT

The impact of conflict on co-parenting outcomes of divorce education programs is not widely explored in the literature despite the prevalence of conflict in divorce. This study used outcome data from a sample of participants ($N = 272$) who took the online Parents Forever™ course between 2012 and 2014. Participants were asked questions about positive and negative co-parenting behaviors as well their levels of conflict before and after the divorce or separation. There was on average a slight increase in conflict from post to follow-up ($M = -0.397$, $SD = 1.54$). Simple linear regression analyses indicated that change in conflict explained a significant proportion of the variance in positive co-parenting scores, $R^2 = 0.07$, $F(1, 270) = 19.98$, $p < 0.001$ and negative co-parenting scores, $R^2 = 0.08$, $F(1, 270) = 23.78$, $p < 0.001$. Results suggest that conflict significantly impacts co-parenting behaviors targeted in the Parents Forever™ course.

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1. Introduction

When parents separate and/or divorce, it can be an acrimonious process, filled with varying degrees and types of conflict. Most conflict and anger is normative and healthy for families but the line that demarcates when conflict transitions from stressful to damaging depends on a variety of unique risk and protective factors (Cummings & Davies, 1994). A consensus exists, both empirically and anecdotally, that more intense, negative and hostile conflict between parents, particularly when it is chronic and long-term, is harmful for children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Kelly, 2012). More conflict is reflective of both a greater intensity of conflict (e.g. yelling louder during arguments) as well as a greater frequency of conflict (e.g. arguing occurring more frequently; Allison & Schultz, 2004; Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O'Leary, 1979). Greater conflict could capture co-parents who experience large amounts of low-level conflict, infrequent experiences of very intense conflict, or in its most destructive form, frequent experiences of very intense conflict. Children in high conflict

families are often at greater risk of experiencing symptoms of internalizing (e.g. depression), externalizing (e.g. delinquency) and having problems in their relationships with peers (e.g. Amato, 2001; Grych, 2005; Turner & Kopiec, 2006; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Zill, Morrison, & Corio, 1993). Cummings and Davies (1994) referred to this as a “developmental psychopathology of angry home environments” (p. 81) because inter-parental conflict interacts with a variety of other variables including child temperament and parenting practices to increase the risk for negative child outcomes.

The legal process that accompanies a divorce can increase inter-parental conflict through a “culture of litigation” or it can operate as a powerful and potentially positive nexus point to intervene with families (Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005, p. 39). In recognition of the role that Family Courts can play in the lives of families, most courts have shifted their approach to attempt to decrease hostile and negative conflict between parents and to work against the diminished capacity to parent found in some divorcing families (Singer, 2009; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Divorce education for parents is a part of this systemic effort to promote positive outcomes for children, with 46 states offering court-connected divorce education programs and several states mandating attendance to divorce education for parents under appropriate circumstances (Grych, 2005; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008).

* Corresponding author at: University of Minnesota Extension, 1420 Eckles Ave, Coffey Hall Room 495, St. Paul, MN 55108, USA.

E-mail addresses: nels8096@umn.edu (S. Cronin), bech0079@umn.edu (E.H. Becher), mccan023@umn.edu (E. McCann), jmcguire@umn.edu (J. McGuire), spowell@umn.edu (S. Powell).

Divorce education can cover a wide variety of content. In a review of divorce education programs by Braver, Salem, Pearson, and DeLuse (1996), most programs addressed the needs of children and how parents impact child well-being while topics related to inter-parental conflict and parenting skills were only moderately covered. Both Blaisure and Gealser (2000) and Salem, Sandler and Wolchik (2013) outlined tiered models of divorce education intervention, with more intensive programs reserved for those couples identified as high conflict and in need of more focused skills-based intervention than what is typically offered in divorce education curriculum.

Given the prevalence of conflict in the divorce process, there is a growing understanding of how conflict between co-parents impacts divorce education outcomes. A few divorce education programs have explored the construct of inter-parental conflict while evaluating their programs effectiveness. Criddle, Allgood, and Piercy (2003) in their evaluation of the Utah divorce education program found a significant but extremely small effect size of program attendance and improved outcomes related to inter-parental conflict. The authors also found that parents who reported higher conflict were less likely to attend a divorce education course. Bacon and McKenzie (2004) explored how conflict related to particular areas (time-sharing, decision-making, and finances) were affected by divorce education programs. Participants with higher levels of conflict had significantly different scores on each of the outcome measures but for the most part, their outcomes improved in line with the rest of the sample. Exceptions included participants with higher levels of conflict who did not improve on conflict related to property issues (while the rest of the sample did), but did improve on satisfaction with time-sharing (while the rest of the sample did not). The authors observed a surprising result that participants who reported they had no conflict at pre-test, experienced a statistically significant increase in conflict at follow-up. The authors also found that different types of conflict were highly related, for example, conflict during the exchange of children accounted for 46% of the variance in conflict over time-sharing (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004).

These results suggest that conflict between co-parents does potentially impact divorce education outcomes. Additionally, they reveal that conflict in the divorce process should be examined by its trajectory over time (does it get better, worse, or stay the same), in addition to its intensity. The common expectation is that most couples going through the divorce process had moderate to high levels of conflict during their relationship, moderate to high levels of conflict during the divorce process and a normative decline to low conflict over time. Evidence suggests that this trajectory of conflict reflects the reality of some families but not all (Kelly, 2005, 2007; Hetherington, 1999). Some dyads with lower levels of conflict during their relationship have much higher levels of conflict during the divorce process and long after (Johnston, Kuehnle, & Roseby, 2008; Kelly, 2003; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Drapeau, Gagne, Saint-Jacques, Lepine and Ivers (2009) identified four trajectories of post-separation conflict: Improved (high conflict to low), deteriorated (low conflict to high), high stable (high conflict before and after), and low stable (low conflict before and after) with approximately equal groups improving or staying high conflict over time, slightly fewer participants in the low stable group and a small sample in the deteriorated group. While perhaps counter-intuitive, higher conflict after separation or divorce can come from a variety of sources including but not limited to, feelings of rejection on the part of one spouse, behavioral health problems, disagreements over co-parenting and can be fueled by either both or only one of the former spouses (Baum, 2004; Kelly, 2012).

Divorce education courses like Parents Forever™ attempt to support parents in their efforts towards improved co-parenting behaviors. What is unclear is how trajectory of inter-parental

conflict is a factor in how parents experience greater or less benefit from the course. Understanding the relationship with conflict trajectory and how parents experience the course could support new development in curriculum that targets each type of conflict trajectory. Doing so could promote better divorce education outcomes for parents experiencing any trajectory of inter-parental conflict. This study contributes to a growing body of literature that examines how trajectory of conflict within the parental dyad impacts divorce education outcomes. For the purpose of this study, we examined if the trajectory of reported relational conflict by participants was associated with outcomes of one online divorce education program, Parents Forever™ (McCann, Lee, & Powell, 2014a; McCann, Lee, Powell, Hardman, & Becher, 2014b). To explore this question, we examined two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Reduction in conflict from post to follow-up will be significantly related to an increase in positive co-parenting behaviors.

Hypothesis 2. Reduction in conflict from post to follow-up will be significantly related to a decrease in negative co-parenting behaviors.

2. Program description

Parents Forever™ is an 8-hour divorce education program developed by [UNIVERSITY X]. It was developed in 1994 to meet the unmet needs of families experiencing divorce in order to mitigate adverse outcomes for children. Minnesota parents experiencing a divorce with disputed custody are required to receive divorce education (Minn. Stat. §518.157). The curriculum was revised in 1996 to meet the 25 minimum content standards that had newly gone into effect for court-mandated divorce education in the state. Then in 2012, Parents Forever™ launched an on-line version of the course in response to a request from the Minnesota Supreme Court. Both the in-person and on-line versions of the program consist of five thematic units: *legal issues and the role of mediation in divorce*, *money issues in divorce*, *impact of divorce on adults*, *impacts of divorce on children*, and *pathways to a new life*. In the section on *the impact of divorce on adults*, the curriculum covers co-parenting strategies, healthy communication, and managing conflict. In the section on *the impact of divorce on children*, the curriculum stresses the effects of parental conflict on children, and how to avoid communication strategies that put children in the middle. *Pathways to a new life* includes building social support networks, new relationships and step-families and ways to promote parental adjustment in the wake of divorce.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants for this study consisted of parents who took the Parents Forever™ online course and completed the pre, post, and follow-up surveys (N=272). Fifty-nine percent of the sample was female and the rest was male (41%). Current relationship status at the time of follow-up included: 1) reconciled with partner (1.0%), 2) considering separation or divorce (1.0%), 3) separated from partner (3.8%), 4) in the divorce process (17.2%), 5) completed the divorce process (66.2%), and 6) never married to the child's other parent (9.6%). Although these categories of relationship status might not be mutually exclusive (such as being separated from partner and in the divorce process), participants were only able to select one category that described their situation the best. The majority of the participants identified themselves as White (91.1%),

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