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# **PARENT EDUCATION AS A DISTINCT FIELD OF PRACTICE**

## **The Agenda for the Future**

Peter Salem, Andrew Schepard, and Stephen W. Schlissel

*The proliferation of educational programs for separated and divorcing parents has created an emerging field of practice. This article examines core questions of professional responsibility, accountability, standards, and practices that must be addressed to advance the development of the field.*

Education programs for separated and divorcing parents have captured widespread attention. New programs are being established at a rapid pace. Increasingly, legislation and court rules require parents to attend an education program (Biondi, 1995). Newspapers, magazines, and television networks—including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, CBS, NBC, and CNN—have all reported on what *Time Magazine* referred to as the latest trend for family courts.

The proliferation of parent education programs is a response to the growing recognition of the impact of separation and divorce on families, and especially on children. The difficulties associated with separation and divorce are well documented and need not be repeated here (see, e.g., Kelly, 1988; Wallerstein, 1991). Parent education programs are generally intended to help parents address these difficulties and learn how to improve the experience for their children and themselves.

Although parent education programs may be news, they are not new (Ricci, 1994). The first court-affiliated workshops for divorcing parents began in the mid-1970s (James & Roeder-Esser, 1994). The number of programs grew during the 1980s in the form of premediation orientation programs and voluntary and court-mandated parent education programs (Salem, 1995). Today, the array of program providers includes family court service offices, private and public mental health agencies, independent parent

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education networks, community-based agencies, educational institutions, and others.

The support of judges involved in family law matters has been pivotal in the growth of parent education programs. As more courts demonstrate that parent education is a priority, the credibility of such programs grows, resources become increasingly available, the legal community becomes more supportive, and attendance by parents rises. Thus what began almost 20 years ago as a smattering of innovative programs and grew into a grassroots movement (Schepard, 1994) now reaches parents in at least 40 states (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996 [this issue]) and seems poised to become a distinct field of practice.

The evolution of parent education into a distinct field of practice requires those in the field to address systematically the core questions of professional responsibility and accountability. The purpose of this article is to identify those questions and encourage the continuation of a vigorous dialogue about how they should be answered.

### **A DISTINCT FIELD OF PRACTICE**

Our belief that parent education is developing into a distinct field of practice is supported by several factors. First, the proliferation of programs is ongoing. Recent surveys have identified more than 560 programs throughout North America (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996; Braver, Salem, Pearson, & DeLusé, 1996 [this issue]). Eighty percent of the programs surveyed by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) had been in operation for less than 4 years and approximately one third for less than 12 months. Although programs use different approaches and methods, they generally have goals and objectives that are consistent with one another (Salem, 1995).

A second factor is that a market has developed for parent education products and services. Many programs are now designed for replication and can be modified for delivery by other court systems, social service agencies, or other organizations interested in providing services. Some programs offer complete packages that include training, videotapes, instructor manuals, and participant workbooks. Fees for products and services range from nothing, to the cost of postage and photocopying, to hundreds of dollars for some packages. Many providers are happy to offer free telephone consultation.

The increase in the amount of research being conducted is a third indication that parent education is developing into a distinct field of practice. Many programs conduct "client satisfaction" surveys, having parents fill out a questionnaire on completion of the program. Researchers are also examining

issues such as the impact of parent education on mediation (Hatcher, 1994); the impact of video on postdivorce behavior of parents and children (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1995; Kearnes, Gordon, Kurkowski, & Arbuthnot, 1994); relitigation rates (D. Zimmerman, personal communication, June 1995); and the impact of parent education on behavior change and development of postdivorce parenting skills (Wolchik et al., 1993).

The development of legislation is yet another sign of growth. In 1995, legislatures in Texas, Colorado, South Carolina, Washington, and Arizona were presented with proposed legislation that would permit or require courts to mandate education programs for separated and divorcing parents.

Finally, perhaps the most important indication that parent education is outgrowing its grass roots is the articulated desire of providers for professional development, networking opportunities, and the chance to participate in discussions that extend beyond individual programs and address the field as a whole. The simple fact that the AFCC's First International Congress on Parent Education Programs attracted more than 400 people demonstrates that parent education programs have arrived.

## **PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

One of the characteristics of an emerging profession is the evolution of standards of responsibility and accountability. In addition, professionals must constantly strive to improve their standards and practices. In this way, they gain the confidence of the community they serve and those who empower and regulate them.

If the parent education movement is to continue to grow, providers must take responsibility for offering highly effective programs, the characteristics of which will undoubtedly be debated for years to come. Providers should be held accountable by the courts and legislative bodies that require attendance, the judges who make referrals, and the parents who participate. Furthermore, providers must be accountable to one another for maintaining practice of the highest standards so that the credibility of the field is unquestioned.

The current stage of the development of parent education bears a strong resemblance to that of divorce mediation in the early 1980s. Although divorce mediation is a distinct field of practice, parent education has generated a similar level of interest and excitement. This is certainly a positive development; however, as Bishop (1984) cautioned more than a decade ago:

As in any growing field, sheer momentum is not always good. The long-term durability of any enterprise is not guaranteed simply by good advertising. The

product must have quality. Internal safety mechanisms—quality control—enhance consumer use and satisfaction. (pp. 5-6)

Milne (1984) suggests that quality control not only protects the consumer but the credibility of the profession: "The rapid increase in divorce mediation services has given rise to the concern that divorce mediation may be appealing to the entrepreneurial interest of a number of unqualified individuals" (p. 49).

The concerns expressed by Bishop and Milne about divorce mediation should be carefully considered as parent education matures into a distinct field of practice. The successful development of parent education as a profession will require a cohesive response to legitimate concerns about credibility and quality control. The process for developing such a response must be inclusive and involve program providers, judges, lawyers, mental health professionals, consumers, and researchers.

We are not suggesting that concerns about quality control have been disregarded. Many independent programs, such as Jefferson County's (Kentucky) Families in Transition and New York's Parent Education and Custody Effectiveness (PEACE), provide special training for their facilitators. Children Cope With Divorce, a Georgia-based network of programs, offers a licensing process to "provide the structure to assure court systems that the provider meets quality standards and is part of a national network" (Bradburn-Stern, 1995). Some states (e.g., Connecticut) have developed guidelines for court-affiliated programs.

Indeed, many providers have taken issues of quality control quite seriously. However, a significant number of programs still require assistance with professional and policy issues. The number of requests for such guidance received by representatives of AFCC, PEACE, and other parent education programs is enormous. As more jurisdictions and legislatures consider parent education, they will look for evidence of competency and responsibility from programs. Given wide variety and continuing growth, we believe that it is time to discuss the development of program guidelines or standards.

Some fear that guidelines necessarily lead to restriction, uniformity, and exclusion. Standards and guidelines in an emerging profession, however, play another function. They are largely educational and aspirational, a call for us to learn to be better than we currently are and to improve constantly.

The development of guidelines requires us to identify and address central issues of mission and quality. Although some of these issues have been well addressed by programs in their own locales, it is instructive to examine the variety of ways in which these questions have been answered. It is also helpful to look at the additional questions that these answers raise.

## **WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR SEPARATED AND DIVORCING PARENTS?**

Helping parents and children cope with the difficulty of divorce is a common, overarching goal for many programs. However, programs also promulgate a variety of more specific goals and objectives.

Geasler and Blaisure's (1995) Michigan study found that programs reported goals that were parent focused, child focused, and court focused, with primary emphasis placed on parent-focused goals. Although these categories are not exclusive, they are helpful in organizing thinking. Examples of goals reported by programs throughout the United States include the following:

### **Parent-Focused Goals**

- Reduce parental conflict
- Increase communication
- Facilitate divorce adjustment
- Teach parenting skills and co-parenting techniques
- Increase social competencies critical to children's postdivorce adjustment
- Provide some "normalizing" data on the impact of divorce
- Make the mediation process more effective for the client
- Help parents understand the emotional and behavioral components of divorce

### **Child-Focused Goals**

- Educate divorcing parents about the effect of parental conflict on their children
- Create a safe environment for children
- Keep children out of the middle
- Prevent delinquency
- Increase awareness of effects of divorce on children
- Increase parents' understanding of the importance of paying child support
- Prevent or reduce children's anxiety, aggression, depression, and behavioral problems

### **Court-Focused Goals**

- Reduce complaints to the court
- Reduce litigation
- Resolve visitation and custody issues
- Help parents understand court procedures

Program goals can thus differ, sometimes dramatically. Some of these goals (e.g., to help parents understand court procedures or provide normalizing data on the impact of divorce) seem attainable within the confines of a

time-limited parent education seminar. Meeting other goals (e.g., to reduce litigation or prevent or reduce children's anxiety, aggression, depression, or behavioral problems) appears more challenging. Braver (1995) contends that short programs (i.e., those that are a single session and 2-3 hours in length) can sensitize parents to important issues and provide motivation for future learning, but that behavior change and skill development require a more intensive experience. This raises the question, are some programs promising more than they can deliver? Do we hurt ourselves if we promise too much?

We believe that, whatever they may be, program goals and objectives must be clearly defined and that the objectives must be empirically measurable so that any claims may be substantiated. Challenging goals are laudable, but overpromising places in jeopardy the long-term credibility and viability of the field. It is inadvisable to suggest that parent education will create long-term behavior change, heal the emotional scars of divorce, clear crowded dockets, or settle custody disputes without solid empirical evidence to support these claims.

#### **WHAT DOES THE CONTENT OF PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS INCLUDE?**

Although program content varies, Braver et al. (1996) found that virtually all programs emphasize (a) postdivorce reactions of parents; (b) postdivorce reactions of children; (c) children's needs at difference ages; and (d) the benefits of cooperative postdivorce parenting.

A few programs include information about legal issues and the court system, but not legal advice (e.g., Schepard, 1993). However, very few programs surveyed by Braver et al. (1996) included a legal component. Some program representatives state that they do not provide basic legal information for fear of upsetting the local bar. Others say that, given their time constraints, programs should emphasize educating parents about the needs of their children.

There are good reasons for presenting legal information in a parent education program. Parents report considerable anxiety about the legal system (Schepard, 1993), which information can reduce. In addition, parent education programs are more likely to thrive with the support of the legal community. Rather than alienating lawyers by ignoring legal information or presenting it without the blessing of the bar, programs can gain support by having lawyers participate in the design and presentation of this component.

Determining course content is complex. Most agree that content should be directly related to the stated goals and objectives of the program, but other

influences exist as well. Should important information be omitted or included because of time limits or political pressures?

For example, advocates for battered women have raised the appropriate concern that encouraging a cooperative co-parenting relationship may be dangerous for victims of domestic violence and their children (Frederick, 1995). Many programs have responded to this concern. Fifty-five percent of the programs surveyed by Braver et al. (1996) include special provisions for victims of abuse. The Massachusetts Probate and Family Court is developing a special program for victims and perpetrators of abuse in which course content differs. Given the prevalence of domestic abuse among separated and divorcing parents (Newmark, Harrell, & Salem, 1995), these developments must be considered appropriate and positive. We suggest all programs should include provisions for victims of domestic violence.

We must ask, however, if programs should adapt their content or develop special programs for other identifiable populations. The tension is this: The more programs tailor their message to specific populations, the more diluted the unifying themes (e.g., keeping children out of the middle of parental conflict) on which most programs are premised may become. Are the needs of children the same regardless of their parents' ethnic and cultural backgrounds? Do we create special units for never-married parents, parents of Latin American descent, adoptive parents, and gay and lesbian parents? Do we discuss co-parenting, parallel parenting, the presumption of equal time-sharing and the myriad perspectives on what is in the best interest of the child? Furthermore, do programs that operate on public funds have an obligation to address the views of all constituencies, including those representing the rights of fathers, mothers, children, and grandparents?

The tension around population-specific programs becomes even greater when issues of race and culture enter the picture. Few people have articulated concerns about targeting never-married parents or domestic abuse victims and perpetrators for distinct information. Providers recognize that these parents often face different issues and that a generic message may not be appropriate. However, suggesting different content (not merely translation) for Hispanics or Asians, for example, creates a level of discomfort, if the norms for these parents are different than those of white, middle-class America. The tension between respecting culture and tradition and uniform program content could take on highly political overtones in this context.

Programs must be prepared to function in an increasingly diverse society. Wise providers and administrators will carefully assess program content and goals in light of the anticipated audience, program resources, and the needs and interests of the community. Some concessions and tradeoffs are unavoidable.



able. It is imperative that providers develop an inclusive process, such as an advisory committee, by which to carefully consider the implications of course content.

#### **WHO ARE THE PRESENTERS? WHAT QUALIFICATIONS AND SKILLS DO THEY POSSESS?**

Presenters currently come from varied backgrounds. Judges, lawyers, college professors, community volunteers, researchers, mental health professionals, graduate students, family court mediators, and parents are among those who present or facilitate programs. Because programs frequently address emotional issues, mental health professionals most often serve as group leaders. If a program has a legal component, it will typically be presented by a lawyer or judge. Braver et al. (1996) found that 72% of presenters have an advanced academic degree. *Children Cope With Divorce* requires licensed providers to use presenters with at least a master's degree in a mental health discipline. According to the director of the program:

While the course content is educational, the group process utilized requires that presenters have a strong knowledge base in family systems and child development, and be skilled in group work and in engaging individuals who may be angry, or in great personal pain. (Bradburn-Stern, 1995)

Academic and professional credentials establish credibility for presenters. However, the assumption that someone holding an advanced degree in mental health is necessarily skilled in group work, presentation, or facilitation is questionable. It is important not to place undue emphasis on the academic or professional background of presenters. All of the knowledge and credentials in the world will not help those who are unable to effectively communicate their message.

The importance of an effective facilitator or presenter must be underscored. In addition to a substantive knowledge base, programs selecting presenters should strongly consider background in adult education theory, group facilitation skills, and public speaking.

#### **IN WHAT TYPE OF TRAINING, IF ANY, DO PRESENTERS PARTICIPATE?**

Braver et al. (1996) found that 62% of programs provide special training for presenters. However, the nature and effectiveness of this training is not known. We also do not know if and how programs evaluate the effectiveness of their presenters.

We believe that training should be provided to all potential presenters. Training must include a review of the course curriculum. In addition, training should include the fundamentals of (a) adult learning theory, (b) group facilitation skills, and (c) public speaking. Training should provide an opportunity for participants to practice and receive corrective feedback. These skills, when combined with the necessary substantive knowledge, will help ensure effective programs.

It is also imperative that programs assess presenter competence and provide periodic in-service training to address problem areas. The evaluation process may include participant feedback and independent expert evaluation.

#### **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION?**

We know that parents respond favorably to parent education programs (Family Division, Connecticut Superior Court, 1995; Hickey, 1994; Schepard, 1993). Research on other important topics, however, remains scarce. If the profession is to continue to grow, the decision makers who allocate resources to establish and support programs will require evidence that parent education programs perform valuable functions.

Conducting effective research raises complex questions. It is very difficult to isolate the influence of an education program on the complex process of family reorganization following separation and divorce. There are many intervening variables, such as socioeconomic status of participants or program content and length, which make implementing an effective experimental design very challenging. Generalizing research findings from one program to another creates additional difficulties. We may never be certain of the ability of parent education programs to facilitate psychological adjustment, reduce litigation rates, encourage settlement, or teach the skills of cooperative parenting, but it is nonetheless important to attempt to assess these qualities.

To cope with the complexities of research design, we suggest that researchers and providers also focus on more limited, but important measures of effectiveness. For example, what impact do programs have on parents' expectations of the separation and divorce process? Do parents demonstrate having learned new information about effective postjudgment parenting? Are parents more comfortable with the prospect of dealing with the lawyers and the legal system? Do they spend less time in pretrial hearings than those who do not attend programs?

This level of inquiry may appear somewhat mundane; however, it captures the critical qualities that courts and parents should value. Parent education programs are not an antidote for the global problems brought on by separation and divorce. Reasonable expectations must be maintained and measures of

effectiveness tailored appropriately, or the initial burst of enthusiasm for programs by court systems will soon fade.

### **WHY SHOULD COURTS PROMOTE PARENT EDUCATION?**

Most parent education programs are court connected in the sense that much of their support and referrals come from judges who hear cases arising out of separation and divorce. The legal system needs assistance in enabling parents to help their children. The volume of family-law-related filings has exploded, without an increase in resources to help courts cope (Gerber, 1990). Most families do not have the emotional energy, financial resources, or time to resolve their child-related disputes in court. In addition, for many families, the adversarial courtroom process adds further hostility and discourages parents from working together.

Courts should support parent education programs because they increasingly recognize what research and common sense suggests: In most cases, courtrooms should be a last resort for resolving family disputes. The problems of children after divorce and separation are generally exacerbated by resort to the courtroom; they are better addressed by informed parents. Court decrees cannot create quality parenting; only parents themselves can.

By supporting parent education programs, courts make a significant social statement. They tell the community that the function of courts extends beyond making and enforcing judgments. Rather, parent education programs are a symbol that courts are an integral part of their communities with a responsibility to help families address problems before they become acute.

### **SHOULD ATTENDANCE BE VOLUNTARY OR MANDATORY?**

We believe that parent education is most helpful if it occurs as early as possible in the separation process. This can be accomplished if professionals working with parents (e.g., attorneys and therapists) persuade their clients to attend programs voluntarily. Unfortunately, many parents are not persuaded and must be ordered to attend.

The issue of mandatory referrals to parent education programs has been widely discussed. Formal mandates exist in at least 396 jurisdictions in 35 states (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996). We believe that those parents who attend voluntarily probably need the programs the least and that those most in need will not attend unless ordered to do so. However, PEACE programs throughout New York State function effectively without a formal order mandating parents to attend. Judges recommend that particular parents attend but do not order them either individually or en masse to do so. Although participation

is not a requirement for access to the court, most parents take the recommendations of the court seriously and choose to attend (Schepard & Schlissel, 1995).

In jurisdictions where no mandate exists, the strong recommendation of judges (as well as mental health professionals, lawyers, and others involved with parents and children) that parents attend is essential. It is highly unlikely that parents will attend without such recommendations (Schepard & Schlissel, 1995). Moreover, if courts strongly recommend the program to parents, lawyers who appear before those courts will do so also.

Many jurisdictions have mandated attendance by enacting legislation or court rules and issuing individual or group orders to that effect. Mandated attendance has several advantages. It symbolizes to parents that courts take the welfare of children seriously. It ensures that both parents receive the information and perspective that the program provides. Mandated attendance also eliminates strategic calculation by parents or their lawyers in evaluating attendance.

Mandated attendance has disadvantages too. It raises legal issues about the power of the court. Some segments of the legal community are concerned that mandated attendance will delay divorce actions and is unnecessary in uncontested cases. Further, resources are required to service thousands of parents, and participation in an educational program may not be appropriate for every divorcing or separating parent. In addition, if attendance is court ordered, thought must be given to what sanctions will be applied to noncompliant parents. In Utah, parents generally cannot be granted a divorce without attending an education program. In Georgia, parents can be held in contempt for nonattendance.

The Erie County PEACE Program Advisory Committee (O'Reilly, 1995) has developed a sensitive position on the "mandatory" issue that we quote at some length:

1. The Program [PEACE] should not be mandated in all cases.
2. Where there is no voluntary attendance through, for example, attorney referral, the assigned judge [at] his or her discretion should make the determination as to who should or should not attend. All . . . judges should be encouraged to make referrals where there are custody or visitation problems, or where the judge perceives the parties have the "wrong focus" and are not acting in the best interests of the children.
3. The determination should be made as early as possible in the case, such as at the first appearance or as soon thereafter as practicable.
4. The actual method of referral and the consequences of non-attendance was a topic of much discussion, and again a consensus was reached along the following lines:

- (a) There should be a standardized referral notice or order which is generated by and comes from the Court.
- (b) There was concern that calling the form an order would generate unwanted effects such as motions for contempt or sanctions, thereby adding to the acrimony of the process and taking away from the real purpose of the program. As such, an official "Referral Notice" may be preferable.
- (c) There was also agreement that failure to attend after a formal referral is made, absent a showing of good cause, is something which should be considered by the trier of fact when making the ultimate decision. That fact should be communicated to the litigants, in advance.

In summary, it is our recommendation that the trial judges be encouraged to make referrals to the P.E.A.C.E. Program, when in the Court's discretion it seems appropriate, as early as possible. The referrals should be made by way of a formal "Referral Notice" or other official court form, which bears a notice or warning to the litigant that non-compliance, absent good cause, is a factor which shall be considered by the Court upon making its ultimate determination.

Mandatory participation is a controversial issue about which many people of goodwill, including the authors, can differ. What is important at this point is a continuing dialogue about benefits, disadvantages, and implications of mandating participation.

## CONCLUSION

The issues in this article seem to us to be the most central to the emergence of parent education as a distinct field of practice. There are many other issues that must be addressed. For example, we believe that for ethical purposes, programs should strictly prohibit presenters from soliciting or accepting clients who have attended their program; that programs have a responsibility for providing classes in safe, secure facilities; that programs must have a secure financial base; that confidentiality protections must be provided for participants and presenters; and that if ordered by the court to attend, parents should have a choice of more than one program.

The agenda for the future development of parent education is thus large and complex. However, we do not want this discussion to leave readers overwhelmed or to minimize the very substantial achievements of programs to date. Through active, interdisciplinary participation and continued dialogue, parent education will continue its emergence as a distinct field with ever higher standards, practices, and aspirations. Parents and children in contact with court systems because of separation and divorce will benefit substantially.

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