

Summary Report: A Qualitative Interview Study Regarding Barriers and Facilitators of Engagement in Two Online Education Programs for Separating or Divorcing Parents

GRANTEE INSTITUTION

Indiana University, Bloomington

RESEARCH TEAM:



Amy G. Applegate

GRANT LISTED LEADERSHIP TEAM:



Amy Holtzworth-Munroe



Claire Tomlinson

Judge Kimberly Dowling



Brittany Rudd

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Introduction

Children experiencing parental separation are at risk for emotional and behavioral problems (Amato, 2010). Effective parenting and reduced interparental conflict can mitigate the relationship between parental separation and negative outcomes for children post-separation (Amato, 2010; Sigal et al., 2011). Thus, many family courts have implemented parenting education programs to inform parents about the importance of positive parenting and cooperative co-parenting following separation and to provide relevant skills (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Such programs are often short (e.g., four hours or less) and in-person (Fackrell et al., 2011). However, courts report low attendance rates at parenting education programs (Cookston et al., 2002), and parents report various barriers to attendance, including practical concerns (e.g., lack of transportation and childcare) and inconvenience (e.g., programs at inconvenient locations) (Mytton et al., 2014). To address such barriers, courts have begun to use online programs, which ideally would decrease the practical barriers associated with in-person programs.



Current Study

The current study was conducted as part of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) comparing outcomes for divorcing and unmarried parents assigned to one of two online parenting programs (i.e., Two Families Now, Caraway & Jones, 2011, and Children in Between, Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996) or to a no-program control group. The RCT sample includes initial divorce cases and initial cases of unmarried parents seeking to settle issues such as child support at the Delaware County Court in Muncie, Indiana (i.e., in Indiana, unmarried cases are called "paternity" cases, as they may require the establishment of paternity before the settlement of issues). As part of the project, after a court case is initiated, parents, or their attorneys, are sent a court order, instructing them to access a court website that informs them whether they are court ordered to complete an online parenting program and, if so, which program. The court order is a one-page document informing parties that if they are ordered to complete a program, then they must do so within 30 days; the online parenting programs can be completed on a variety of devices (e.g., computers, tablets, or smart phones) and take three to five hours to complete. However, in conducting the RCT, we encountered recruitment issues, with only 47% of parties complying with the court order to access the court website; 51% of divorced parents and 28% of unmarried parents complied with the court order. In addition, 81% of parties who did access the website and were ordered to participate in an online parenting program did so; 83% of divorced parents and 63% of unmarried parents accessing the court order and ordered to complete an online program did so. Given these low rates of compliance with the original RCT procedures, we designed the current study, a qualitative



interview study, to assess parents' perspectives on barriers and facilitators to both accessing the court website and completing the online parenting program. Here, our presentation of qualitative results will primarily focus on the experiences of unmarried parents.

Parties were recruited for the current qualitative study through party contact information sheets gathered by the court from all parties eligible for the original RCT. We received the party information sheets for 442 parties. However, to be eligible for the qualitative interview, parties had to be over age 18, have already had their court hearing to discuss custody issues (i.e., to minimize the chances of parties falsely believing that study participation would affect their case outcome), and could not be represented by an attorney (i.e., due to the complexity of obtaining consent for study participation, as legally, we could not directly contact represented parties). Applying these eligibility requirements, we next attempted to contact all 278 study-eligible parties via phone, email, text, and mail. We reached 97 parties, and interviewed 61 parties: 43 unmarried parents and 18 divorcing parents.

The qualitative interview contained two sections: the first focused on barriers to accessing the court website, while the second focused on barriers and facilitators to participating in online parenting programs. We conducted interviews with 20 parents who actually participated in an online parenting program. We also conducted interviews with 41 parents who did not participate in a program; these parents were given basic information about such programs and asked to hypothetically consider parenting programs and provide their hypothetical reactions to such programs (e.g., possible pros and cons of the programs).

Key Findings

Finding 1: The court plays a large role in many parents', particularly unmarried parents', decision to access and participate in court-ordered parenting programs.

Only 47% (i.e., 51% of divorced parents and 28% of unmarried parents) of parents who were sent a court order to access a court website did so. Parents' failure to comply with the court order is clearly a major drop-off point in getting them to complete an online parenting program. Participants in the current qualitative interview study reported many reasons for not complying with the court order, including busyness, feeling that the website would not have been helpful, general confusion over why they were ordered to access the court website, and even a lack of awareness that the court order had mandated them to do so. Further, some parents (especially unmarried parents) were dissatisfied with the method by which the court communicated information about the program to them (i.e., through a court order). Our findings suggest that if courts want parents to participate in parenting programs, they should consider using varied forms of communication with parents and not rely exclusively on a mailed court order with limited information regarding the program. Previous research has suggested that various methods are more effective in communicating with potential program participants and highlighting program benefits. Such options include brochures, videos, reminder calls, and endorsements of the program (Winslow et al., 2016).

After accessing the court website, parties continued to mention the role the court played in their decision to participate in a parenting program. Some parties mentioned doing a program because it was mandatory, indicating that a court order does motivate some parents to follow through. Unmarried parents also mentioned that a reason to complete the program is to "look good" for the judge. Additionally, some parents reported that they would have liked more court involvement in the process, including court acknowledgement of successful completion of a program, or, alternatively, a negative consequence if a program was not completed (i.e., the latter was a suggestion usually offered for use with the other parent, not oneself). Beyond court acknowledgement of program completion, monetary incentives, along with food and childcare, have been used as positive reinforcements (Axford et al., 2012; Dumas et al., 2010). Negative consequences from the court might include holding a parent who fails to attend the program in contempt, denying that parent shared parental responsibility or time-sharing, or not granting a divorce



until both parents have completed the program (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). These options may be controversial (e.g., such mandates may be used by one parent to elongate the divorce process, thereby "punishing" the other parent) or impossible to impose in cases involving unmarried parents who do not get a divorce decree.

Taken together, the study data suggest that the court plays a particularly crucial role in some parents' (particularly unmarried parents') decision to participate in programming. Parents may require, or benefit from, additional efforts and support from the court through the process, such as receiving clearer materials about a program (e.g., possible program benefits), assistance from court staff when trying to complete a program, or consequences (either positive or negative) imposed by the court based on program completion (Insabella et al., 2003).

Finding 2: Many parents who did not participate held negative perceptions of the program; in contrast, among parents who actually participated in a program, most perceived it positively.

In a second set of questions, we gathered feedback about parents' perceptions of the programs, from both parents who did or did not participate in a program. When given information about such programs and asked to hypothetically consider them, nearly one-third of parents who did not participate in a parenting program reported a negative perception of some aspect of them (e.g., they did not need the program), with unmarried parties doing so more frequently than divorcing parties. In contrast, all parents who actually did participate in a parenting program reported a positive perception of some aspect of it (e.g., the program was helpful), with unmarried parents who completed the program being more apt than divorcing parents to report that participation improved their interparental communication. These findings suggest that once parents actually participate in a program, it is perceived positively. Thus, to increase rates of program engagement, we need to counter parents' negative preconceptions of the programs and increase parental understanding of the potential benefits of a program, especially among unmarried parents.

Finding 3: The availability of social support in a program can either encourage or discourage parenting program completion among parents, depending on parents' interest in social support versus privacy considerations.

Participants reported that social support and privacy issues could either encourage or discourage their participation in the online parenting program. More specifically, some participants reported that they would have appreciated, or did appreciate, the privacy of an online program (i.e., they did not have to interact with others in person). However, others reported that they would have been, or were, discouraged by the lack of social support offered by an online program. Some participants, particularly women, desired more social support than was offered in the programs we tested. Thus, it is possible that including an optional form of online social support, such as a social media network or discussion board (Nieuwboer et al., 2013; Love et al., 2016), could increase participant engagement by honoring the desires of both participants who wanted more social support and those who did not. It is also possible that offering parents a choice between an online program and an in-person program could increase engagement by allowing parents to select what best fits their needs for social support.

Finding 4: Despite the assumption that online parenting programs should have fewer barriers to parent access and completion than in-person program, many parents continue to perceive online parenting programs as inconvenient.

Some parents reported that participating in a program would have been, or was, inconvenient. Notably, unmarried parties mentioned inconvenience, particularly inconvenience associated with the length of the program, more often than divorcing parties. However, the majority of parties reported the opposite, believing that participating was, or would have been, convenient. Such findings indicate that while online programs eliminate many common barriers to program participation (e.g., transportation, childcare) (Koerting et al., 2013), some parties (particularly unmarried



parties) continue to encounter inconvenience issues. Perhaps even online parent programs can benefit from changes, such as being shorter, or supplementary supports, such as allowing additional time to complete a program or providing alternative locations to participate in a program (e.g., offering computer access and childcare at the court).

Finding 5: While most parents did not struggle with the technology associated with the online programs, parents may still benefit from technology support.

Across both parents who did and did not participate in a program, many reported that they enjoyed, or would have enjoyed, the use of technology and that they had, or would have had, access to the technology required to complete the programs, which is consistent with previous research (Mcgoron et al., 2018). It is, however, important to note that a small percentage of parties, in particular unmarried parties, encountered some form of confusion or difficulty associated with the technology of the online program (e.g., a program video section kept replaying). These findings suggest that continued online support, perhaps through informational pages or being able to call an Information Technology specialist, may increase participation rates (Robinson, 2018).



Conclusions

The results of this study are useful for understanding barriers and facilitators to accessing and participating in online, educational parenting programs among divorcing and unmarried parents opening an initial court case to settle child related issues. Parents' reports indicated the important role that the court can play in increasing parental engagement, particularly among unmarried parties. In addition, both parents' negative opinions about the programs (e.g., it would not be helpful, problems with technology) and inconvenience (e.g., busyness) are important barriers to consider when attempting to increase parent engagement in such programs. Further systematic studies of methods to increase parent engagement are required to better understand effective methods of engaging parents. While the interview responses in the current study are helpful in providing ideas to increase program participation, researchers, in conjunction with court systems, must first, or perhaps concurrently, determine if online parenting programs are actually effective before investing heavily in ways to increase parent engagement in programs. Such questions motivated our ongoing RCT study on the effects of online parenting programs.



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