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Centering Children in Co-Parenting

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Abstract

Comprehensive systems theory identifies several associated risk factors and consequences of separation but, research suggests that legal divorce itself has few direct effects on children (Amato, 2000). While there is diversity in children's responses to separation, generally associated risk factors are behavioral disruptions, emotional upheaval, anger, resentment, anxiety, guilt and depression (Wallerstein, 1985; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1985). Parents abilities to cope with their divorce are critical to the child's adjustment and, if parents are able to control their feelings toward their ex-spouse, cooperate in parenting, negotiate differences, and settle their quarrels in privacy, their children will show fewer social and emotional problems (Tschann, 1989; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989; Buchanan, 1991; Hetherington, 1999; Sumari, 2020). It is expected that the curriculum design and implementations will address these complex needs of families. A thematic analysis is being done of Cooperative Parenting and Divorce: Shielding Your Child from Conflict written by Susan Boyan. The thematic analysis will identify major themes, contextualize the curriculum and its implementation. The analysis seeks to identify how children are centered in this curriculum regarding legal divorce and separation.

Key words: Separation, Divorce, Co-Parenting, Child-Centered

Introduction

Divorce often happens in a matter of minutes. It takes just a couple pen strokes on a paper to finalize. Of course, anyone who has lived through a divorce knows it is not that simple. The periods of transition before and after a divorce are sometimes amicable and sometimes full of disdain. Since there is no perfect way to handle divorce, governments and families have evolved to meet their own needs (Mason, 1994, Polak, Saini, 2019; Eddy, 1993; Tucker, J., Friedman, H., Schwartz, J., Criqui, M., Tomlinson-Keasey, C., Wingard, D., Martin, L., 1997). The needs of the families are vast and are often financial, physical, social, and emotional (Walker, T., Ehrenberg, M., 1998).When there are children involved in a divorce, those needs become far more complex (Amato, Gilbreth, 1999; Coiro, Emery, 1998; Fabricius, Hall, 2000; Fabricius, Luecken, 2007; King, Sobolewski, 2006; Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, Conger, 1994; Whiteside, Becker, 2000).

Identifying the needs of children is no small feat. Researchers and families have worked hand in hand to make strides regarding how and why children's needs could be met in the transitional periods of family separation (Amato, Gilbreth, 1999). The literature reviewed for this project explored the history of divorce to show how children have gained the spot-light in family separation as societal norms have changed over time. Developmental research focusing on "the good of the child" described how family systems can still function after divorce (Landau, Bartoletti, Mesbur, 1998; Ricks, 1984). The difference between legal divorce and the period of separation is then explained. Children and families are examined within the context of current societies and then, some basic needs of children are justified.

This project sought to understand whether or not children's needs are centered in *Cooperative Parenting and Divorce* curriculum. This curriculum was selected because of its evidence based history. Although the National Registry for Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) has been discontinued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Authority (SAMHSA), Active Parenting programs had been recognized as evidence-based since 2008 (Active Parenting, n.d.). Core curriculum components are identified. These are descriptions of how the curriculum is set up to help parents reflect on their changing relationships. The relationships between co-parents is the catalyst for the discussion regarding each parent's responsibility to meet the needs of their children. Out of these core components, emerged some child-centered themes. These themes are identified in order to convey to parents, curriculum developers, and court officials the power and necessity of placing children's needs in the center of family-conflict resolution.

The success of a family is not limited by a particular family structure. What children need are loving, on-going relationships with adults who are willing to acknowledge, validate and regulate the challenges of family separation (Sumari, 2019, Buchanan, 1991; Hetherington, 1999). This project is both a contribution and a tribute to the co-parents and children of separation who strive every day to be the best version of themselves and who work toward being part of a supportive and functional- albeit, split up- family system.

Literature Review

In the early 16[th]century, the organization of the family complemented the organization of production (Carborne, 1995). The laws of coverture erased a married woman's existence so that she could not own property or enter into a legally binding contract without her husband's consent

(Mason, 1994). The father alone was responsible for the care of his children and was entitled to

their obedience and labor (Carborne, 1995). By the 19th century, industrialization brought about a

well-documented shift in the relationship between the family and the market. The separation of

domestic and commercial spheres moved men out of the home and celebrated women's domestic

role. South Carolina, as early as 1809, granted custody to a mother to advance the best interest of

the child but, at the dawn of the 20th century, judges were still reciting the common maxim that

"the natural right is with the father, unless the father is somehow unfit" (Mason, 1994).

Recognition of the importance of mothering brought an emphasis on nurturing children, but it

also supplied a new standard with which to judge parental adequacy (Mason, 1994).

The progressive era yet again came with changes in the relationship of family and

society. The modern state was described as a "super-parent, generous and nurturing, but

judgmental" (Mason, 1994). With the development of greater state involvement came public and

private welfare organizations that brought about greater state involvement in the decision making

about how children should be raised and whom they should live with (Mason, 1994). The results

of these developments were two-fold. One belief was in the importance of preserving the family,

the other was the conviction that the state must intervene in families in order to protect children

(Mason, 1994). The progressive era formalized legal recognition of mother's rights to custody

and recognized the interests of children.

The modern era can be described as the Gender Equality and Best Interests of the Child

Era. Economic changes dismantled the nuclear family, women in the labor force achieved greater

independence and equality and adult relationships became more diverse (Mason, 1994). The

"best interests of the child" were interpreted to favor contact with both biological parents

(Mason, 1994). This preference had been used to justify joint custody, even where one parent abused the other (Cahn, 1991). Historically, legal custody had been far more about the rights of mothers and fathers than it had been about the welfare of the children.

Current Developments and Children's Needs

Developmental research affirmed that adequate parenting may be provided by either or both spouses (Wallerstein, 1985), and challenged the universal standard of sole custody (Benjamin, Irving, 1987; Ferriero, 1990). Today custody decisions tend to be based more on the needs of the child – "The Best Interests of the Child Criterion" - than the rights of the parents (Landau, Bartoletti, Mesbur, 1987; Ricks, 1984). Negotiating and maintaining a shared parenting plan, parents taking the child's perspective, separating their adult needs from those of their children, and responding empathically to the child's concerns is referred to as child-centeredness (Edwards, Kutaka, 2015; Ehrenberg, 1984). The success of a parenting plan that is in the best interests of children will inevitably require that it is flexible and responsive to the changing developmental needs and resources of the family system (Ehrenberg, 1984).

Research suggested that the legal divorce itself had few effects on children (Amato, 2000). Rather, the time between one caregiver initially moving out and the legal divorce itself-referred to as 'the period of separation' (Wyder, Ward, De-Leo, 2009)- affected behavioral, social and academic outcomes among children. Comprehensive systems theory identified several associated risk factors, indicators, and consequences of separation in order to move toward a more complex understanding which helped guide the assessment of conflict and contributed to matching services that better met families' needs (Amato, 2010; Lamb, 2012). There is great diversity in children's responses to their parents' marital transitions. Most children manifest some

behavioral disruptions and emotional upheaval immediately following their parents' divorce and

remarriage (Wallerstein, 1985). Anger, resentment, anxiety, guilt, and depression are commonly

experienced by children at this time (Hetherington, Cox, Cox, 1985). Parent's abilities to cope

with their divorce are critical to the child's adjustment (Camara, Resnick, 1989). If parents are

able to control their anger and resentment toward their ex-spouses, cooperate in parenting,

negotiate differences, and settle their quarrels in private, children show fewer emotional and

social problems (Tschann, 1989; Wallerstein, Blakeslee, 1989; Buchanan, 1991; Hetherington,

1999; Sumari, 2020).

Micro level effects are considered direct effects- although they are present, they are not

necessarily related to the legal divorce, but rather, to the separation of the family in general

terms. Microsystem risk factors included negative parental behaviors, lack of time, attachment

insecurities, power differentials, and financial dependency (Polak, Saini, 2019; Eddy, 1993;

Tucker, J., Friedman, H., Schwartz, J., Criqui, M., Tomlinson-Keasey, C., Wingard, D., Martin,

L., 1997). The exo-system is recognized as those immediate support people, and could also

expand to include the various agencies a family may engage with in order to navigate the change

in their family system. Exo-system risk factors included extended family taking sides, also

known as "tribal warfare" or "cheerleaders" (Johnston, 2003; Johnston, Roseby, Kuehnle, 2009;

Mitcham-Smith, Henry, 2007; Trinder, Kellet, Swift, 2008) as well as professionals taking sides,

serving as negative advocates. Other exo-system risk factors included the involvement of child

welfare, police, or other professional institutions (e.g., lawyers, children's legal representation,

child advocates, etc.). The macro-system is that larger context, generally outside the child's

control, that has the potential to both directly and indirectly influence the family's functioning on

a large scale. Macro-system risk factors included the law and legislation, culture, religion, and

traditions (Kelly, Emery, 2003; Yeager, 2009; Saini, Black, Fallon, Marshall, 2013).

Children's essential needs during the processing of the separation of their family are (1)

forgiving of parents, (2) accepting parental divorce, (3) maintaining contact with both parents,

(4) emotional support from others, (5) letting it go and moving forward with life, and (6)

appreciating the parent-child relationship (Sumari, 2019). Studies done with adolescents

determined that the teens adjusted reasonably well when parents maintained clear boundaries,

encapsulated conflict, avoided expressing their children to overt conflict and engaged in positive

cooperative parenting in the post-divorce period (Buchanan, 1991; Hetherington, 1999).

Inter-parental conflict following divorce was related to feeling caught between parents, and

feeling caught between parents, in turn, was related to adolescent depression and deviance

(Buchanan, 1991). Literature also suggested that frequency of contact is indirectly associated

with better child adjustment through its influence on relationship quality (Amato, Gilbreth, 1999;

Coiro, Emery, 1998; Fabricius, Hall, 2000; Fabricius, Luecke, 2007; King, Sobolewski, 2006;

Simmons, Whitbeck, Beaman, Conger, 1994; Whiteside, Becker, 2000).

Methods

This paper sought to answer the question: how are children centered in conversations of

custody and post-separation for families experiencing divorce? In an effort to answer this

question, a content analysis was conducted on Active Parenting's *Cooperative Parent and*

Divorce by Susan Blyth Boyan and Ann Marie Termini. This text was chosen because of its

35-year history of scientific-based studies testing the efficacy of the Active Parenting model

(Active Parenting Programs, n.d.).

The content analysis conducted focused on objectives and class structure, teaching strategies, use of court-specific and "lay" language and, child-centeredness in family conflict resolution techniques. These codes were chosen because they frame the potential affect and personal meaning the curriculums had for families. A second round of coding was conducted to collapse the original codes in order to identify major themes, potential areas for limitations and recommendations.

Curriculum description

The *Cooperative Parenting and Divorce* program explores the issues associated with divorce through a group format that incorporates skill development, small and large group discussion, parent interaction and application of skills through homework assignments. The mission of the curriculum was to meet the struggle of balancing children's well-being with parent's skills. The group format was suited for parents exhibiting minimal to moderate conflict. The program was video-based and psychoeducational and is designed to improve the quality of parental relationships, reduce parental conflict and the risk factors that influence the child's post-divorce adjustment.

The eight chapters are divided into four components of two chapters each. The first two chapters emphasized the child's experience of divorce and highlights the necessity of developing a parental relationship that is sensitive to the needs of the child. The second two chapters focused on the adult's experience of divorce and assisted parents in shifting their relationship from former spouses to co-parents. Chapters five and six featured communication skills and anger management. Chapters seven and eight stressed negotiation skills and planning for the future,

and emphasized that co-parenting is forever. Parents are introduced to techniques to determine their concerns, practice how to address these issues in a productive manner and create cooperative agreements based on their child's best interest.

Core Curriculum Components

The core components of this curriculum gave parents opportunities to develop and practice thinking and behavioral patterns that centered their children's needs in the divorce and separation periods of transition. Role playing developed emotional regulation and got parents thinking in terms of what's good for their children. Dear Mom and Dad letters gave parents the opportunity to hear the voices of their children. Reflexivity helped parents see themselves as separate from their children. This was important for identity development and the grief process. Identifying stages of grief promoted healing in parents and children. All of this together encouraged and taught parents to meet their children's needs of emotional support, letting go, acceptance, and moving forward, which are all key factors in the well-being of children who've experienced divorce.

Role playing

In a child-centered approach, it is helpful for parents to be able to put themselves in the shoes of their co-parent and their child. Role playing created a safe space where dialogue could open up. This was beneficial to co-parents as they are both trying to reconcile their own emotions and be mindful of the needs of each other and their child. Follow up questions built on the concepts learned in role plays. Emotions that the co-parents and children might have been feeling were identified. Understanding the emotions of the child, in particular, is related to

children's essential needs. Role playing emphasized planning ways to address problems, using

emotional maturity and considering what is best for the child.

The role play in session two took extremely common situations and focused on centering

the children through planning and communication. Parents used true feelings, voice tone and

body language to practice so the real situations and conflicts became easier to navigate. The

parents also tried to take the position of their children and be prepared to describe how the

situation would affect their children. The facilitator asked probing questions like, "what went

well and what did not? What kind of feedback would you give the other parents? Were they

respectful? How was the child feeling?" The goal was for parents to be able to identify what they

would do differently in real life when they bring up a problem with their co-parent and, to

identify and empathize with how their children might have been feeling subjected to or placed in

the middle of these conflicts.

Dear Mom and Dad

At the end of each session in the parent guidebook, there is a short letter written to "Mom

and Dad" from their child. The letters were reflective of how the child would interpret the

lessons from each session and, might in turn, have benefitted from their parents practicing the

skills from each session. Giving co-parents an opportunity to reflect on these lessons from their

child's perspective is a key component to child-centeredness. Parents needed to be able to

identify how this work would benefit their children because most of the reasoning throughout the

chapters is that parents need the skills "for the good of the child." The good of the child is the

most commonly used child-centered language from this curriculum. This language built on the

parents' ability to identify the emotional and physical needs of their child and to make decisions based on how their children will be impacted. This is aligned with the aspect of child-centeredness that focused on children's needs. Children need to feel important and valued, and they also need to be supported in communicating their experiences. These letters were an example of how children's voices came through to their parents.

Reflexivity

Reflexive parenting was beneficial for centering the child in the co-parenting relationship. The ability to understand oneself and others in light of mental states, and to keep the child in mind, meant that behaviors must be seen in light of what had triggered the behaviors. Mature reflexivity in regard to the co-parenting relationship was successful when parents could understand the meaning and intention of their children's behaviors, their co-parents' behaviors and were able to see themselves as separate from their child and co-parents. On the surface, this might have appeared contrary to what is commonly referred to as secure attachment but in fact, seeing oneself as separate from a co-parent and child gave parents the opportunity to see each perspective as unique and independent. For parents to become more sensitive and responsive to a child's emotional cues, they must be aware of their co-parent, their child's and their own mental state and how those mental states impacted their behavior. The capacity to make these connections lead to understanding rather than feelings of rejection, isolation, resentment, anger and other strong emotions that could inhibit a parents' ability to make decisions for the good of their child. When parents did not recognize these individual and separate emotional states and the effects they have had on behavior, there was a risk for miscuing one another that could result in miscommunication or poor emotional regulation and an elevated stress response. Session three

of the parent handbook provided opportunities to develop this reflexivity with the emotions log, child-rearing decisions activities, identified stages of grief, provided journaling space for parents to write about their experiences in each stage. Each of these tools created opportunities for parents to be intentional in thinking about what goes into their parenting and their relationship with their co-parent.

Results

Functions of Major Themes

Five major themes emerged when the child-centered framework was applied to this curriculum. These themes, different from the core components, were less explicit. The activities in each session functioned to support parents with skills development. The major themes were also further supported by the core components. Identifying states of grief, validating and emotional maturity, and being motivated to change for the good of the child" were all aligned with children's identified needs during divorce and separation. Identifying stages of grief was a reflexive activity that brought awareness of how people are engaging with their children and co-parent. Validating and emotional maturity were practiced through role-playing. This helped parents understand and respond helpfully to their children's needs. Being motivated to change "for the good of the child" explored with the dear Mom and Dad letters and provided an opportunity for children's voices to be heard and centered.

Stages of Grief

Identifying stages of grief and, giving the parents time to jot down their own reactions to each stage, was one example of a point during this curriculum when parents had the opportunity to explore more deeply their current responses to their co-parenting relationship. Most people

grieve over the loss occurring through divorce much like they do when a relative dies (Staff, F.E., 2019). Importantly, the stages of grief sets the scene for handling memories. Some people mistakenly believe that everything about the past should be erased in order to focus on the future (Boyan, 1999). Recognizing these misconceptions and then writing down one or two positive memories helped parents remember the positive times they did have. Many of those who refused to remember the good times were often the same ones who refused to accept and heal from the divorce (Boyan, 1999).

The curriculum suggested that there were a couple ways people stay engaged (through revenge, through hope, through control, by playing the victim) but in the end, this was harmful to the children and both co-parents. Being aware of the ways people stay engaged, and then being reflexive of where each parent was in this process, was an important step in accepting responsibility over how each parent responded to their children. Forgiveness, disengaging and letting go were the next themes that lent themselves to the process of grieving. These were all steps in the process of learning to emotionally regulate. In the curriculum, forgiveness was recognized as a decision and a choice (emotional regulation). And also, forgiveness could have been very disturbing to someone who had been hurt (validation). Similarly, disengaging was the part of the grieving process of letting go of an old role and adapting to a new one. Letting go was the next step in the process of emotional regulation and maturity. The "disengagement contract" was one symbolic step of letting go that delegated each parent as responsible for themselves, how they made decisions, and set the goals of being able to separate their own feelings for the co-parent from their child's feelings for the co-parent. Again, this ability to see each person

involved as an individual meant that there was more room for distinguishing and responding appropriately to each person's needs.

Maintaining Contact

Session three explored the roles that parents had in their children's lives. These roles influenced the parent-child relationship. The "chart of responsibilities" focused on parents in roles as singles (Boyan, 1999). Parents who saw themselves as independent of their co-parent and child, and recognized the important roles that their co-parent has in their child's lives are acting with emotional maturity. In the "child-rearing decisions" activity parents listed ten decisions they make when their child is with them; then, they put a check by the decisions that the other parent makes when the child is with them (Boyan, 1999). This acknowledged and validated the extent to which each parent makes decisions on behalf of their child. Emotional maturity and validation contributed to maintained and functional parent-child relationships.

Validating the roles that each parent plays in their child's life goes hand in hand with the child maintaining relationships with both their parents. There were areas of shared responsibility that complicate the relationship between co-parents and their decision making. Each parent was responsible to keep their co-parent, minimally, involved with and informed of their child's life. Parents helped children maintain contact with their caregivers when they could, in a deeper capacity, work together to each have a say in decisions regarding their child. What's ultimately good for the child is to have attachment with adults in their lives who are always responsible to them in their decision-making processes.

Motivating for change "for the good of the child"

Session four worked on some skills building to help co-parents form relationships where they would be able to more realistically act as their best selves. The business relationship activity works on parents' abilities to establish patterns of communication that created less opportunity for emotional interactions. The guidelines for a business relationship were that the individuals were "dedicated to a common goal, committed to a win-win relationships, negotiated differences when they disagreed or when new circumstances arose, limited the relationship to specific topics, observed common courtesies, and communicated with facts, not feelings" (Boyan, 1999). This framework helped to define guidelines that worked toward a new structure of parenting. This realigned relationship allowed the two parties to communicate about their child's welfare, solve problems, negotiate solutions and share valuable information so that both parents would realize their mutual goal of providing for the emotional well-being of the child.

Forward orienting is one step in motivational interviewing that is used to help people realize that their current behavior is not aligned with meeting the goals that they have for themselves. This curriculum assumed that the goal of these co-parents was to have a relationship in which they are their ideal selves. The curriculum asked the parents to imagine and make goals to act as their ideal selves "for the good of the child." In the beginning of the curriculum, parents were asked to cut and paste a photo of their child inside their workbook. Then, parents were encouraged to regularly look back at the photo of their child to remember why they are motivated to act as their ideal selves. This is the strongest example of child-centeredness in the curriculum. Parents were expected to center their children in their reasons for creating change in their life and to use their well-being as a guide for decision making.

Conclusion

This project sought to understand how children are centered in low to medium conflict co-parenting curriculum. This curriculum introduced parents to techniques to determine their concerns, practice how to address these issues in a productive manner and create cooperative agreements based on their child's best interest. Parents were taught to meet their children's needs of emotional support, letting go, acceptance, and moving forward, which are all key factors in the well-being of children who've experienced divorce. Each of these tools created opportunities for parents to be intentional in thinking about what goes into their parenting and their relationship with their co-parent. Children need to feel important and valued, and they also need to be supported in communicating their experiences. Parents were expected to center their children in their reasons for creating change in their life and to use their well-being as a guide for decision making. A realigned relationship between co-parents allowed the two parties to communicate about their child's welfare, solve problems, netotiate solutions and share valuable information about their child, as well as helped parents realize their mutual goal of providing for the emotional well-being of their child.

This project can be used to inform families and parents of the impacts that their grief process has on their children. Facilitators can refer to the concepts of child-centeredness addressed here and make explicitly clear the benefits of parents understanding and practicing the skills and using tools that help their children feel heard, valued, acknowledged, and understood. Curriculum developers might use this project to make informed decisions about the direction their research could take in order to make parenting programs more inclusive. County and State judges can use this project to shape the language they use regarding children's experiences in family separation.

The need for child-centeredness does not stop at the parent and family education curriculum. If child-centeredness were a framework through which we came to view and understand family systems and functions, then certainly children would flourish. The need for children to be placed in the center of a family system, and to experience no strain, no tugging on them, is necessary for children's well-being and stable development.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that it analyzed only the written curriculum. This means that the implementation of the curriculum, and the discretion of the facilitator, was left out of the analysis. The implementation is an opportunity for the facilitator to be creative, read the room and respond to the needs of the families, and to emphasize certain messages. The conclusions drawn in this study were limited to the interpretation of the text and might not have fully captured the capacity that the course has to be child-centered in it's action.

Recommendations

The concept of a curriculum regarding family skills development is rather controversial. Family systems, dynamics and structures are constantly evolving- they are rarely as uniform as a curriculum is. A curriculum could potentially impose and insinuate a "correct" way for a family to be and, can be overly-simplified and rather exclusive. The stigma associated with attending a course like this could be enough to make a family disengage. And, the argument is still out about what kinds of long-term impacts courses like this have, especially in high-conflict situations.

Families, particularly those going through separation, may not rely on formal social supports (like a parenting course) during this transitional time. Families who are experiencing a custody dispute may or may not have family and additional social support to help them through a

situation like this. There are many avenues families take in navigating their way through the separation. Future research could consider this. Research regarding kinship and "chosen" family, those informal supports, and incorporating those relationships into the curriculum could be one way to be more inclusive of families who experience the transition of family separation in isolation from their biological family members. This kind of research could open up a world of alternative family-support plans and options, for curriculum developers, facilitators and the families themselves. Including extended family in the curriculum development and as participants in classes could also address the stigma around courses like this and, families might see more of themselves and their situations in the solutions their families generate. It could be argued that, without this lens, this curriculum doesn't accurately reflect the realities that families who are experiencing separation actually face.

It could also be helpful to explore how parents in high-conflict situations would benefit from a course like this but one that is more considerate of potential triggers and safety concerns for co-parents and caregivers. The curriculum hits the nail on the head when it says that forgiveness, to someone who has been hurt, seems impossible. For caregivers in high-conflict situations, forgiveness could even be irresponsible. That being said, a child-centered curriculum could still be meaningful and impactful for parents in a high-conflict situation. It's recommended that future research involve high-conflict parenting situations. It may be necessary to develop another type of curriculum that directly and explicitly states the goals of centering children in a safe, realistic new family plan and, to give particular attention to caregivers who need additional support navigating their family's separation.

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