CHILDREN IN COMMON:

ENSURING THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN WHEN PARENTING APART

Children's Mental Health eReivew

Children in Common: Ensuring the Emotional Well-Being of Children When Parenting Apart

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH EREVIEW

The Children's Mental Health eReview summarizes children's mental health research and implications for practice and policy. It addresses the gap between what we know from the literature and what we experience working with families. Each issue explores a specific topic area and reflects the expertise of a group of people working in various research and practice settings.

October 2015

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Children of divorced or unmarried parents living apart are considered at risk for multiple health and well-being issues throughout their lifespan (CDC, 2015; Sacks, Murphy & Moore, 2015). An increasing research base shows that when parents can reduce conflict and remain financially stable, children fare better after divorce (Kelly, 2003). To mitigate the potentially adverse effects of divorce on children, 46 of 50 U.S. states require parent education classes for divorcing couples (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). However, parents who were never married and are living apart are usually not subject to any educational mandates (Peterson, Shirer, Marczak & Allen, 2011). This means that unmarried parents establishing paternity through family court do not typically receive parent education interventions in the way divorcing parents would.

Despite the growing literature on coparenting and divorce education interventions, little has been written about the practice of delivering court-mandated parent education programs for both divorced *and* unmarried parents living apart.

Through its sustained investment in supporting Minnesota families affected by divorce or separation with its Parents Forever™[1] parent education program and its partnership with Hennepin County's Co-parent Court[2] project, University of Minnesota Extension is able to explore the intersection of research about coparenting with the practice of court-mandated parent education programs for *both* divorcing and separating never-married parents.

Thus, this article summarizes the latest research findings on selected coparenting issues that have practical importance to both divorcing and never-married parents living apart. This article also highlights recent research on the practice of parent education as it affects both divorcing and separated never-married parents, as well as a foundational discussion of coparenting issues and parent-education practice from the experiences and perspectives of parent-education stakeholders. We, the authors, also have included illustrative quotations from stakeholders in the Parents Forever™ program and in Hennepin County Co-parent Court — quotations cited in recent studies of the Parents Forever™ program (PF) (Olson, Brady & Marzcak, 2012) and Co-parent Court (CPC) (Hardman, Ruhland & Becher, 2014).

What is Coparenting?

When two adults parent a child in common, each is an individual parent. When two adults share the role of parent, it is referred to as *coparenting* (Feinberg, 2003). Coparenting "couples" may include many configurations of two adults sharing care-giving responsibilities, such as two mothers, two fathers, a parent with an adult sibling or grandparent, or a parent and another adult relative. Distinct from the relationship between adults, coparenting is the relationship between parents that focuses on the child. Coparents may be living

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[1] Parents Forever ™ is an eight-hour parent education program for divorcing or separated parents that meets or exceeds Minnesota's 25 content standards of divorce education when there is contested custody of minor children.
[2] Co-Parent Court was a three-year national demonstration project to assess ways to better serve unmarried parents establishing paternity. The project was a partnership of Hennepin County (MN) Family Court, child support enforcement agencies, community service providers, and University of Minnesota Extension.

together or apart, or intimately related or not. In this eReview we focus on coparents who are living apart while jointly raising a child.

The term 'coparent' is often used as a noun, to identify an adult sharing parenting duties with the other parent or another adult (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan & Rao, 2004). "Coparent" also is used as a verb to describe the actions of coparents, and in a similar way, "coparenting" describes the action of parents and other adults working together to help raise children (McHale et al., 2004).

With these terms defined, let's examine how professional practices strengthen the bridge of support between coparents. One stakeholder described the benefit of Co-parent Court this way:

I don't know a single one of my . . . friends who don't struggle with coparenting. It's just hard. And the other person is always crazy. It's never them. So, I'm not saying this [Co-parent Court] is the panacea and it's all rainbows and roses for them, but you need people to believe that dads matter, kids and kids' connections with their parents matter (CPC, 2014).

What is Coparent Education?

Coparent education classes typically aim to mitigate children's exposure to parental conflict, improve parenting skills, and reduce coparents' return to court (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999). The focus on reducing parental conflict and increasing parenting skills is necessary to minimize the documented risks for children of separated unmarried parents or divorced parents (Center for Disease Control, 2015; Sacks, Murphy & Moore, 2015). Although there is a great deal of general research on the well-being of children after divorce, research on the specific value of divorce-education programs contributing to that well-being is lagging (Fackrell, Hawkins & Kay, 2011). A burgeoning area of research also suggests that coparent education classes could help mitigate the potentially adverse effects of parenting apart for separated never-married parents (Sandler et al., 2012).

Court guidelines in most states, including Minnesota, have not been able to keep up with the increase in unmarried parents, resulting in fewer services being available through the courts to unmarried coparents, especially those coparents from underrepresented demographic groups such as grand-parent pairs, sibling pairs, or other configurations, when compared with their divorcing counterparts (Peterson, Shirer, Marczak, & Allen, 2011). Coparenting education is often synonymous with divorce education because divorce education is the more prevalent court-mandated intervention.

However, we, the authors, are focusing on coparenting education for both divorcing and separated never-married parents because the curricular goals of both types of education programs is quite similar in that many divorce education programs include content on coparenting. Our approach is innovative in acknowledging that the actions of coparenting are similar across a diverse range of family structures, including those where the coparents were never intimate partners, or have other kinds of familial relationships, such as sisters, cousins or grandparents. This article also touches on several issues of practical relevance to coparent program learners that are both reflected in the literature and mentioned by the learners themselves. These include coparenting strategies, constructive parental conflict, social value of the other parent, and coparent and extended family support.

Current Perspectives of Coparenting

Each adult in a coparenting relationship, as well as other adults in a child's life, are part of a large, complex system consisting of several smaller intersecting systems that constitute a familial support network. A child's resilience is affected by the functioning of these intersecting systems over time, which may lead to a change in the child's resilience as he or she grows and develops (Masten, 2014). The familial support network is part of one of the many multi-faceted adaptive systems continually interacting and changing throughout the course of a child's life. Protective factors within the systems in the network include relationships with parents, friends, and other competent and caring adults, as well as mentors who provide a broader network of social support (Masten, 2007).

A parent's relationship with the other parent is another key type of social support. For example, positive coparenting increases non-residential fathers' involvement with their children (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Another example from Bailey & Zvonkovic (2003) shows that the challenge of a non-residential parent in maintaining his or her parental role is related to perceptions of others validating that role in a variety of social settings. Those settings include circles of family and friends, as well as institutional support settings, such as school and places of worship and employment. Research shows that if a non-residential parent feels his or her parental role is validated in these various support systems, this belief positively influences his or her capacity to remain in a parental role. To illustrate, Edin and Nelson (2013) reported:

American men were partners — usually husbands – first, and parents second. Fatherhood was a "package deal." And it was the tie with the mother that bound men to their obligations to children, obligations they might otherwise have ignored… In some fundamental sense, it is not a "package deal" at all, but family life a la carte. Yet the purest expression of the desire to parent their children well and get what one man called "the whole fatherhood experience" is their willingness to try to make a go of it with their baby's mother — to try and form the "ideal family unit" that they view as supreme. They believe it is vital to participate in "all of it" — to witness the first words, the first steps taken, and other crucial milestones (pp. 85-86).

Coparenting Strategies

Research has identified four typical patterns, or styles, of coparenting: Cooperative, disengaged, conflicted and mixed. Understanding these types of coparenting strategies helps professionals who work with coparents to identify how they work together parenting their children.

Each coparenting style captures two elements of coparenting:

- *Parental cooperation* – The level of a coparent's willingness to work with and positively engage with the other parent.

- *Parental conflict* – The level of a coparent's disagreement with the other parent — and the degree to which it is openly displayed.

	High Cooperation	Low Cooperation
Low Conflict	Cooperative	Disengaged
High Conflict	Mixed	Conflicted

Adapted from Baumrind (1991) and McCann, Lee and Powell (2014)

The *cooperative coparenting* style is demonstrated through the ability to share a variety of parental responsibilities while maintaining consistent behavior and avoiding conflict and belittling types of behavior. As one might guess, it has been shown that non-residential fathers practicing cooperative coparenting have a higher level of involvement with their children than non-residential fathers practicing other coparenting strategies (Waller, 2012). Among non-residential never-married parents, the degree to which the two parents could cooperate in their parenting had a positive effect on the involvement of the father (Carlson et al., 2008).

In addition, Markham, Ganong and Coleman (2007) found that mothers who believe cooperative coparenting is the best style for them *and* have important people in their life with the same belief were more inclined to actually practice cooperative coparenting. Cooperative coparenting has been seen to be most fulfilling among parents whose children are in shared custody and when both the mother and the father remain cooperative (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990). One facilitator of a coparent education course commented: "A lot of people [in the class] are learning to show respect to the coparent and that respect will be passed on to the child" (PF, 2012).

The *disengaged coparenting* style is used by parents who do not agree on most things, but do not openly display their disagreements in front of the children. Nevertheless, when they parent their children, each does so independently of the other parent's ideas or values (Waller, 2012). Some parents were found to be more likely to practice disengaged coparenting if they had older children and less likely if they had at least one child under the age of six (Maccoby et al., 1990). Disengaged coparents also showed a decrease in paternal involvement, but not as low as that of conflicted coparents (Waller, 2012) – see following description. One Parents Forever™ facilitator (2012) suggested "Training parents to disengage from the conflict" is an important role for the facilitator of the program. This training may help coparents not only move away from behaviors causing conflict, but also adapt more engaging behaviors.

The *conflicted coparenting* style features frequent displays of disagreement between parents. Non-residential fathers practicing conflicted coparenting report the lowest level of involvement in their children's lives, compared with non-residential fathers practicing other coparenting strategies (Waller, 2012). One study showed that it is more difficult to avoid conflict if there are three or more children (Maccoby et al., 1990), while another showed that fathers' experiences with a conflicted coparenting style can lead to mothers keeping their children from the father (Edin & Nelson, 2013).

The Mixed coparenting style includes a combination of high cooperation and high conflict in coparenting strategies. The conflict experienced in mixed coparenting may differ from that experienced by conflicted coparents because of the co-occurring high cooperation. Research on mixed coparenting styles shows similar positive findings as the cooperative style, with non-residential fathers showing similar high levels of involvement in their children's lives (Waller, 2012). Coparents practicing mixed coparenting show cooperation by regularly talking about things like children's schedules and parental roles and responsibilities while also showing the conflicted strategy by frequently displaying disagreement. Like children of parents practicing conflicted coparenting, children of parents practicing mixed coparenting are more likely to witness their parents' conflict (Maccoby et al., 1990). Coparent education can help learners reduce levels of conflict. As one stakeholder for Co-parent Court said:

I had a mother come who was in [an] anger management [class], had nothing to do with the father, and had no desire to have anything to do with the father. [Because she's . . . come in, taking anger management classes, [she's] starting to communicate better with the father and trying to make sure he has visitation and even if he doesn't show up, to not be angry (CPC, 2012).

Parental Conflict – Not Always Harmful

Clearly, conflict can be harmful for children of divorce. One factor that mediates child well-being and functioning is exposure throughout the divorce process to parents' negative interactions (Amato, 2000). However, researchers are also questioning whether conflict between coparents is always harmful to children. Conflict can stimulate interaction among newly divorced parents working to redefine their roles as coparents. The new roles are ambiguous; therefore, they may display conflict as they try out new behaviors and seek to define those new roles (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002). Despite experiencing conflict, coparents can still present a unified front to their children by working to make conflict constructive.

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Constructive parental conflict is not intense, does not focus more than necessary on the children, and involves avoiding displays of disagreement in front of the children (Emery, 2012). This type of communication reduces behaviors such as talking negatively about the other parent and can lead to resolution, which might include agreeing to disagree. When parents feel that they are stuck in a pattern of conflict with one another, coparenting education facilitators support more constructive approaches to conflict. This approach may lead parents to more proactive communication. As reported by one Parents Forever™ class facilitator: ". . . we get a survey that says, 'before the class I didn't know how to talk to my ex; after the class I feel like I know what to do now'" (PF, 2012).

Social Value of the Other Parent

Coparents vary in their ability to ascribe social value to the other parent, and to acknowledge that parent's value to others including their children. The concept of "face value," which was described by Goffman (2005), suggests that individuals strive to "save face" in various contexts within their social networks. Thus, coparents can either support

the other parent's social value with a "positive face" or threaten the other parent's social value with a "negative face" (Frisby, Booth-Butterfield, Dillow, Martin, and Weber, 2012).

The strategy of "facework," as explained by Frisby et al. (2012), involves the work of practicing positive face value. This is also explained as the protection of each other's integrity while proceeding with a divorce or other type of separation. Facework can be of great importance to the coparent relationship following divorce or separation. Practicing facework early in and throughout the process of divorce or separation can set the stage for less conflict and more positive communication between coparents well into their future. If this positive groundwork is laid by each parent and includes positive facework with extended family and social networks, it can lead to a more positive family transition (Frisby et al., 2012) and possible future well-being for the family.

A Parents Forever™ class facilitator notes the importance of facework: "The most common feedback, 'not speaking badly of the other parent in front of the children' or 'important to communicate with the other parents freely and frequently' — those comments come up a lot" (PF, 2012).

Also important to the concept of social value of the other parent is the attachment style of each coparent. Coparents may find it difficult to redefine their roles following divorce or other type of separation when their former romantic relationship no longer exists. The difficulty they experience may vary according to their own attachment style and their overall behavior toward the other person. Parents with secure attachment style have been shown to be able to engage in more stable coparenting (Robertson, Sabo, & Wickel, 2011). Overall, communication between coparents serves to establish the relationship norms of a separated couple and create boundaries for how the coparents will interact, especially in front of children.

Support Between Coparents

During the last decade, a national movement has taken place in which public policy discourages granting sole custody to the mother in divorce cases. With this shift, joint custody has become increasingly common and now almost equals sole custody, with 45.7 percent of custody awards categorized as "mothers only" and 45.4 percent categorized as "all types of shared" (Brown & Cook, 2011). With this trend, coparents' support for each other and their level of involvement with one another and within their social networks seems to have changed. Having the other parent as an active and involved part of a child's support network can help create stronger well-being for the child and for the family as a whole. For example, coparents may provide unique supports to children, such as one spending more time on homework, while another becomes more involved with extracurricular activities. Stakeholders have noted these changes: "I'm seeing a lot more men wanting to be involved in parenting time, which you may not have seen 10-15 years ago," (PF, 2012); or "Joint physical custody is becoming more and more common," (PF, 2012).

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Extended Family Support

Coparents can facilitate and maintain links between extended family members and children. Research on separated unmarried parents, for example, shows that their relationships with their extended families are connected to non-residential fathers' level of involvement with their children in a variety of unique ways. For example, when a mother who is coparenting lives with *her* mother (the child's grandmother), the maternal grandmother's relationship with the father can influence (as well as be influenced by) how involved he is in the child's life (Gavin et al., 2002). It has also been shown that when mothers and paternal grandmothers get along, this can motivate the

father to stay involved with the children (Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008).

Respite and Other Kinds of Support

Having an involved coparent provides another kind of support in that it gives the primary caregiving parent (usually the residential parent) time to attend to other needs. This is essentially respite care, which can be a significant piece of support for the entire family. One Co-parent Court stakeholder made a point on this topic:

One participant said the biggest thing the father provides is a day off so she can take a break once a week. Just the fact that he would come and get the child for a day or overnight – she thought it was fantastic. The guy is young, didn't finish high school, has a criminal record, can't get a job, and may never pay a dime, but the mother reported just having the father watch the kid was great (CPC, 2012).

In-kind support, or non-cash goods or services, are another type of support commonly provided by non-residential coparents. In their study of fathers, Kane, Nelson, and Edin (2015) found that not only did low-income fathers who lacked stable employment give high levels of in-kind support to the other parent, but also that the reason behind this in-kind giving was relational — designed to help ensure the future of the fathers' relationships with their children.

Resilience and Well-Being for Coparents

All the coparenting strategies discussed earlier have the potential to build each parent's resilience and overall well-being. There are also a variety of factors within an individual's larger social context that may play a role in that person's level of resilience during a traumatic life-changing event, such as divorce or other type of separation (Masten, 2007). The coparenting strategies that parents use, how parents communicate through conflict, preservation of the other parent's "face," and the network of support for each parent can all impact the level of resilience and overall health and well-being for both parents and children alike. Facilitators of coparent education programs can

promote use of these strategies. As one stakeholder of a Parents Forever™ course stated:

I would not be doing it [the course] if I wasn't very convinced that it does help parents. It's the parents in the class absorbing the material... If parents can understand what they're trying to do in creating a new relationship with their coparent, then that can only benefit their children. Over the years, we have actually had a number of couples who happened to be in the class together, who, even after the first session... light bulbs came on for those people. [They] decided against litigation and actually started talking to each other. [One participant said:] "We hadn't talked in months; our lawyers had been doing all the talking. We actually talked during the week — we worked everything out. Figured out a parenting plan. Told lawyers to stand down." It motivates them to start making some decisions in a collaborative way and to step off the litigation track (PF, 2012).

Strategies for Coparent Education: Roles and Influence

Coparent education is informed by adult learning theory and research. Heimlich and Norland (2002) explain how adult education contexts and practices affect participant learning in a Teaching-Learning Exchange. Heimlich and Norland's framework describes how the facilitator of a learning experience interacts with each individual learner and the entire group, as well as course content and the learning environment to optimize knowledge transfer or continued use of learned skills after a course ends.

Current research has focused on specific issues such as teacher motivation (Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009), the learning environment, and learner motivation (Kim & Frick, 2009). As a result, the

adult education-practice topics covered in this article include facilitators' motivations to teach, ability to care, ability to listen, and assumptions about learners. We (the authors) also address learners' motivations and emotional states, group processes, and the effects of the physical classroom environment on learners. In the Heimlich and Norland framework, each individual element (facilitator, learner, group, content, and environment) is considered important on its own and each element has a significant interaction with the other elements to affect knowledge transfer (Heimlich & Norland, 2002). What do we know about each of these elements? How is this research reflected in coparent education stakeholders' experiences? Let's explore these questions by each element.

The Facilitator

The facilitator is an essential element in formal adult education, with the literature suggesting that facilitator traits, such as motivation to teach, ability to care about learners, ability to listen to learners, and assumptions about learners, play an integral role in participant learning.

Facilitator's Motivation to Teach

Facilitators have diverse motivations for teaching. Researchers theorize that a facilitator's primary motivation for teaching affect learners by shaping the emotional classroom environment (Oreç Etürk, 2013). A facilitator's motivation also affects his or her levels of energy, enthusiasm and level of stress (Ofoebgu, 2004). Facilitators' motivations for teaching also influence instructional practices and educational outcomes for students (Atkinson, 2000). This last may be particularly true when a facilitator's motivation for teaching is internal, or intrinsic. A recent study indicated that students with intrinsically motivated facilitators felt more supported in their learning than students with externally motivated facilitators (Lam et al., 2009). That same study also found that a facilitator's intrinsic motivation to teach might improve students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Lam et al., 2009).

In addition, research suggests that a facilitator's life experience and belief in the relevance and power of the curriculum affects his or her motivation for teaching (Hurtado, 2014). Motivation for teaching coparent education classes was expressed by one Parents Forever™ facilitator this way: "I have personal experience with divorce and parenting apart. I have a personal touch and ability to share experiences and make it real, so people really enjoy (the classes)" (PF, 2012).

The focus on the facilitator's motivation and interior state of being became a central theme in the culture of Co-parent Court. At the beginning of each stakeholder meeting, the group reflected on these words from Bill O'Brien, former CEO of Hanover Insurance: "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener . . . With the right intention, other things fall into place" (Scharmer, 2007).

Facilitator's Ability to Care

Researchers theorize that enhancing future functioning of adults in the middle of a life transition like divorce or other type of separation requires more than addressing known learning needs (Merriam, 2005). Evidence suggests that a facilitator's ability to care about learners may be crucial to learner outcomes (Hurtado, 2014). Literature on a facilitators' ability to care notes that caring is not synonymous with sympathy, which is feeling bad for someone but not helping. Rather, caring aligns with the state of willingness to act and intervene in response to someone who is hurting (Wright, 2004).

According to Wright, care is not something in addition to teaching; rather, care infuses teaching. Teachers in another study commented that caring was a choice that can be operationalized in multiple ways in and out of the classroom (O'Connor, 2006). In fact, a recent study showed that the interpersonal support and inspiration learners received from caring facilitators mediated knowledge transfer (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013).

Research also suggests that facilitators who care tend to produce greater gains in student outcomes,

have more positive classroom environments, and receive better emotional responses from their learners (Teven, 2001). As a Co-parent Court stakeholder said: "[An important part of my approach] is being authentic. The population I work with can tell whether you care about them or not. I am as transparent as I can be . . . letting them know they are not the only one in the world experiencing a certain thing…" (CPC, 2014).

Facilitator's Ability to Listen

Current adult education literature states that a facilitator's ability to care about learners by listening to them affects adult learning outcomes (Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 2014). Research by McGinty, Radin, and Kaminsky (2013) reached a similar conclusion when it found, among other things, that effective facilitators are prepared, believe in the importance of the content, are great listeners, and demonstrate a positive attitude. One Co-parent Court stakeholder (2014) expressed thoughts on the importance of caring this way: "I don't think it's so much the content as someone to listen to these parents."

Other research contends that a facilitator's concept of caring may be influenced by the facilitator's own life experiences and not by the needs of their learners (James, 2012). In James' study, facilitators who felt they intuitively understood the needs of their learners were often unaware that they interpreted their learners' needs in a negative light. Thus, James (2012) urges facilitators to listen humbly to their students and examine the underpinnings of students' identities.

McClusky's groundbreaking "theory of margin" (1970) illustrates the connection between learner stress and the importance of listening to the learner. McClusky states that an individual's capacity to take on new activities, such as learning, is related to his or her current life demands (defined as "load") and the support resources the learner currently depends on (defined as "power"). Facilitators need to know learners' levels of load and power in order for effective learning to take place (McGinty et al., 2013). Knowing that many

coparent education learners are experiencing significant stress may require facilitators to be even more flexible and willing to make adaptations than usual as they teach the class. As one Co-parent Court stakeholder (2014) said:

So for example, if someone comes to me and they're talking about housing, but what I actually need is for them to complete a parenting plan, I'm going to do whatever I can to address their housing because they're more likely to get their parenting plan done, versus if I say "Well you know what? Let's talk about that later. What we really need to focus on is this parenting plan." So kind of meeting them where they're at. Dealing with what they come to the table with because they're not going to care about what it is I want them to do or what it is I think is best for them to do if their key focus is "Where am I going to sleep?" or "How can I get my baby formula?" I need to be mindful of that and address those issues first and foremost. And if I'm not going to, if I can't, I still need to say "I heard what you said. We're going to wrap back around to that a little bit later." Otherwise I just won't have their attention and . . . they won't see it as authentic from me.

Facilitator's Assumptions about Learners

One stakeholder of a coparent education course reported sometimes reminding resistant learners that it was "their own poor choices" that caused them to be mandated into the coparent education class. This admission is one example of how a facilitators' assumptions may affect learners' experiences in the classroom. Other examples of a facilitator's assumptions may include attitudes and beliefs about appropriate reasons for marriage dissolution, length of relationship, beliefs about gender roles, same-sex couples, religion, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and more.

Recent research suggests that an atmosphere that is accepting of learners and is encouraging, warm, and supportive is crucial to promoting learning (Knowles et al., 2014; McGinty et al., 2013; Teven, 2001). On the other hand, an atmosphere infused with a facilitator's implicit negative bias yields less motivated students and poorer learning outcomes (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner, 2002). Implicit biases are hidden attitudes of which a person is likely unaware

(White-Means, Dong, Hufstader, & Brown, 2009). Implicit biases affect people's perceptions, behaviors, and interpretation of events. A facilitator's implicit negative bias can manifest itself in non-verbal behaviors, unfriendliness, less positive comments, less encouragement, and a belief that some students are less intelligent or have less promising futures; any or all of these reduce student motivation (Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010; Dovidio et al., 2002).

Research indicates that facilitators express their implicit bias unintentionally. Nevertheless, learners internalize these negative messages (Rosenthal, 2003), with learners who are members of already stigmatized groups being more susceptible to their influence (McKown & Weinstein, 2002). Implicit biases filter the messages facilitators hear from learners and impact the facilitators' ability to humbly listen to learners (James, 2012). For this reason, James advises facilitators to critically examine their construct of caring and how they listen, and become more aware of the implicit biases that filter what they hear from learners (2012).

The Learner

Adult learners bring their own motivations, perspectives, and life experiences into the classroom. Some evidence indicates that all these factors may be exaggerated when classes are court-mandated. As one Co-parent Court stakeholder (2014) said, "You have the disadvantage that some parents have already made up in their minds that

this is not going to work." Fortunately, effective facilitators can overcome some learners' pre-conceived notions. For example, one Parents Forever™ facilitator (2012) said, "Not everyone comes in with the best attitude . . . but every session I've had people say at the end, 'I'm glad you do these classes', or 'Boy, I wish I knew some of this at the beginning of the process.'"

Motivation to learn can be affected by individual characteristics such as openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and a proactive personality (Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006). These characteristics may explain up to a third of the variability in adult learner motivation in some contexts (Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006). Other studies about motivation to learn suggest that it is a relational and fluctuating concept, rather than something innate and constant within people. Ahl (2006) suggests that motivation to learn is influenced by who (or what institution or organization) tells the learner that there is a problem that needs to be addressed through education, why that party feels that way, and how that party reached that conclusion. Motivation to learn may be greatest when the individual decides for himself or herself that education would help solve the problem. Conversely, motivation may be lacking when others make the determination for the learner, such as in the case of court-mandated education.

The overall learning climate also has a significant effect on learner motivation (Kim & Frick, 2009). The learning climate created by a facilitator's motivation for teaching, as well as his or her ability to care and listen, assumptions about learners, and instructional practices all have a reciprocal relationship on student motivation and can help overcome some barriers to learning (Lam et al., 2009).

Because of biochemical responses in the body, learners' emotional states and stress levels affect their attitude about attending coparent education classes, as well as their ability to learn, i.e., to retain information and transfer learning to new situations (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014).

Stressors that may affect adult learners include home life, children, family relationships, work pressure, work environment including bosses and co-workers, personal finances, family and personal health, and incidents that may have happened on the way to class such as traffic or other unexpected delays (Petty & Thomas, 2014).

The Group

In educational settings, collaborative or cooperative learning strategies, such as small or large group work, enhance the student experience. Collaborative learning strategies can activate learners' information-processing abilities at a deeper level, enhance their intrinsic motivation to learn, improve their feelings of educational competence, increase their feelings of social engagement, and strengthen their self-reliance (Hänze & Berger, 2007). Research suggests that individuals with low self-esteem in educational settings may benefit most from group work, as it improves their feelings of competence (Hänze & Berger, 2007). Participants in court-mandated, coparent education programs come from diverse educational backgrounds, and some may feel low competence in educational settings.

Recent research on the benefits of collaborative learning strategies as measured by test performance is mixed. On the one hand, Hoke and Robbins (2005) report that learners in classes featuring collaborative learning strategies performed better on their skills tests than their peers who attended only lecture-based classes. Similarly, learners from collaborative-learning

classrooms improved their knowledge of content and decreased their misconceptions of core content when compared to their peers in more traditional classes (Acar & Tarhan, 2008).

However, Hänze and Berger (2007) reported that students of facilitators who used collaborative learning strategies had the same test scores as students from more traditional lecture-based classrooms. Thus, research indicates that collaborative learning strategies (such as small and large-group discussion) enhance multiple aspects of a learner's experience, but those strategies may or may not translate to immediate content knowledge gains. As one Co-parent Court stakeholder shared when reflecting on the program's approach (2014):

I know [the workshop facilitators'] philosophy and they'll [the facilitators will] tell you this, is that they learn from the parents, and the parents learn from each other. This was not a kind of command-and-control-type operation. It was a support-and-help-people-do-the-best-they-can operation.

The Content

Self-directed learning is a key assumption of adult-education programs (Knowles et al., 2014). Self-directed learning helps adults survive their changing environment, acquire new knowledge and skills, and make meaning out of their life experiences (Guglielmino, 2008). Adult learners need to know why educational content is relevant, how knowledge and skills can be put to immediate use, and that this knowledge and these skills will help them solve meaningful issues and complete useful tasks (Knowles et al., 2014; Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, & Gioe, 2006).

All this said, court-mandated coparent education programs challenge the assumption of self-directed learning because learners are essentially forced to participate (Myers-Walls, 2011). As a result, designers of court-mandated courses face strong pressure to meet learners' need for the content to be relevant, timely, useful, and objective. Here's what one Parents Forever™ stakeholder said about the objectivity of that course:

For those who receive [coparent education] early [in the divorce process], they learn more about the legal process from the program and they learn about money management. For those who don't have those skills, those are the two most important things unless you've got people [who] are willing to do their own research. A lot of people go online if they have access, they'll read blogs or they'll read articles or books of whatever that are like, 'I was married to the meanest SOB in the valley' – very mean, very one-sided stuff. The blogs are equally as bad. And the next-door neighbor – they are of course great advisors, but they also want to stir the pot. Parents Forever™ is neutral. It's objective. It isn't blaming, and it provides constructive information on how to be a better person . . . I think that's the strength of Parents Forever™ over anything else (PF, 2012).

The Environment

Evidence suggests that adults need to feel at ease in their learning environment in order to learn and transfer knowledge to new situations (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013; Merriam & Leahy, 2005). Feeling at ease in a learning environment has two reciprocal parts: the physical environment and the psychological environment. Research shows that the physical environment strongly affects the psychological environment. The lighting, the temperature, noise from surrounding rooms, and more can all affect learners' ability to concentrate and learn. Gillen, Wright, and Spink (2011) report that classroom cleanliness, organization, and layout affect the student experiences, as does the ability to choose where to sit. They found that needs for physical comfort must be met in order to meet learners' psychosocial needs.

Myers-Walls (2011) review of involuntary parent-education programs, such as court-mandated programs, critically evaluates how physical factors may affect the psychological environment to create a safe space for learners' sharing and self-reflection, both of which enhance the knowledge transfer process. For example, learners may not want to share their concerns or ask questions if the classroom door is open and a steady stream of noisy people are constantly walking by. Learners may feel that their information will not stay in the classroom or be private in such conditions.

An additional element to consider in the relationship between physical and psychological environments is congruence. Chang, Hsiao and Chang (2011) report that student achievement and attitude toward the subject matter was enhanced when the physical learning environment matched the learners' preferences. According to one Co-parent Court facilitator (2012), "My belief is that they [learners] know much of the information, but sometimes a different voice, a different environment helps bring it out."

From Research Knowledge to Coparent Education

The practice of teaching court-mandated coparent classes to both divorcing and never-married adults is an underdeveloped area in coparenting research. In this article, we (the authors) have sought to fill some of that information gap by summarizing research that does exist, grounding that research in current educational theory, and presenting findings and anecdotal quotations from two programs in which the authors are involved – Parents Forever™ and Hennepin County Co-parent Court.

Now, it's time to hear from practitioners in the field. The following "Implications for Practice and Policy" section shares three community partners' responses to research on coparent education practice, especially for both divorcing and never-married parents – and its relevance to their work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Maisha Giles, LMFT, LICSW, NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center; Former Co-parent Court Navigator, Hennepin County Co-parent Court

The integration of research into programming is essential for both divorcing families as well as never-married parents going through a separation or custody situation. Coparents that have never married, including parents with no prior relationship, need coparent education just like every other kind of separated family. Many times with never-married families, one parent does not realize they could even be involved in parenting and these programs give them a voice in raising their children. When they do, the child is likely better off in many ways.

This *eReview* describes the important parts of a coparent education program using current research on different types of coparents, support, facilitators and participants. During my time working with Hennepin County's Co-parent Court program, I saw the positive impact that coparent education research has on separated families through the creation of strong programming. The current research has allowed for us to create important programs but I am urging for more research to be done on parents that have never been married, including parents who never had a relationship before the child came along. This research would give the facilitators of coparent and divorce education programs the most relevant information that would best help these often underserved populations.

This *eReview's* section on coparent and extended family support is the most useful part of this

research that I have seen in practice. The shift of the courts toward awarding shared custody has raised the level of involvement of both parents and increased the effectiveness of coparent education. There is a longstanding belief that the child is better if one parent has sole custody. I have seen children do much better when the father becomes involved even if it is simply because they provide another area of support. I have heard many single mothers talk about how helpful it is when a non-residential father takes the children for even one day a week. This type of "in-kind support" decreases stress on the mom by simply giving her a day off.

At the same time, a father's care of children strengthens his relationship with the kids. When a non-residential parent is involved, they also open up support from their own family, which can significantly increase the number of resources available to these children and potentially the mother. As this *eReview* explains, we know that the more support and resources a child has is positively related to the well-being of that child. This concept guides the conversations we have on resources within the coparent curriculum on support and resources. Many of the families that come through Co-parent Court have minimal support and resources, so identifying any areas of support and working on increasing resources is something we focus on. For residential parents, the need to increase support and resources also requires attention in the curriculum to the role of the child's other parent and working on the coparent relationship.

A strong coparent education program is more effective with a facilitator who understands the curriculum and can use it to help all different types of families. In addition, the research on the importance of a facilitator's ability to care and listen, as well as their motivation to teach, highlights other important parts of these programs. The facilitator has to understand the curriculum, but also has to meet the parents where they are mentally and emotionally each day they come to class. People don't just show up to Co-parent Court with only coparenting issues – they show up as who they are, with many issues or stressors in their lives. This is why we would do a check-in at the beginning of every class, to understand where the participants are at each day. Even if the parents vent about something unrelated in their lives for a couple of minutes, they are much more likely to really listen to me when I talk about coparenting. I found that giving a little of myself and showing a genuine curiosity about people's lives has a huge effect on how a class flows.

I think the focus on the individual is one of the biggest challenges with the current research that I see in programming. We examine coparent styles to identify common themes, research the facilitator to know what is necessary for a skillful teacher, develop an understanding of how someone learns, and even explore what type of environment is best to set up a solid structure for these classes.

However, it's the participant that guides the course. This research does not provide much room for individual differences being used to help the parents. What do we do if someone comes in to class and is resistant to the coparent relationship and no one asks why? Often times there has been abuse in the relationship or addiction with one of the coparents and these factors are causing issues that the curriculum is not addressing.

Individual differences in people coming through the program will always be something that forces me to be flexible in how I teach a coparent program. I think the next step in program change is allowing for more individual differences to come out, even in a group setting. I've often thought that splitting

up parents into groups based on their coparenting style at the time of the intervention (coparent education) could be hugely beneficial. We could then focus on the needs of these families in a more attentive way.

Along with these specified groups, I want to see facilitators hold individual meetings with the parent or both parents similar to a therapy group. Facilitators could meet with participants in a group once a week and then meet with each individual once a week. I think this would allow for the parents to work through circumstances unique to their lives while getting the most of the group setting.

Regarding research, I think the best thing we can do is conduct as many comprehensive longitudinal studies as we can. I would like to know how these parents are doing five years from now and then 10 or 20 years from now. I want to know how their kids are doing. I want to know what stuck from these classes and what didn't, so we can continue to help all types of families in the future.

A particular population to consider includes communities of color. The true application of coparent education to communities of color will be in the facilitator's art of teaching and how culturally competent they are in delivering services and education to an audience and its subcultures. For example, I (as a facilitator) could be very culturally competent in delivering services to clients from North Minneapolis. However, I would be less skillful when working with parents who migrated to Minnesota after Hurricane Katrina. Yes, both populations are communities of color, but the norms and values of the specific subculture may vary – changing how I deliver services.

> The true application of coparent education to communities of color will be in the facilitator's art of teaching and how culturally competent they are in delivering services and education to an audience and its subcultures.

With that said, I believe the research highlighted in this *eReview* article does apply to communities of

color with the understanding that it is a starting point and not an ending point. Generating more interest and understanding in the complexities of coparenting among service providers would do wonders. It doesn't need to be this niche service that is discussed and talked about only among "experts in the field." Experts are great for guiding but the results of dysfunctional coparenting become a social issue. Therefore, it needs to be collectively addressed. We need to figure out how we can get the family court judge, the employment counselor, and the pediatrician educated on healthy coparenting as well.

Stephen L. Onell, M.S., LISW, FathersFIRST! Program, Parents Forever™ Instructor

As an experienced classroom teacher and social worker working with parents, children, and adult learners in general, the material covered in this *eReview* article was familiar. In addition to my professional experience, I served as a guardian ad litem in family court for seven years and have been an instructor in the Parents Forever™ Program in three different counties in Minnesota for almost 20 years.

The various pieces of research and participant quotes and comments in the article certainly resonated with me. One area that I especially relate to is the change in demographics of Parents Forever™ students. Initially, students came to Parents Forever™ classes primarily due to an impending divorce. Rarely did we see an unmarried parent, and that was usually a never-married, single father seeking parenting time and/or custody.

Another part of the article that resonated with me discussed parents' resistance and sometimes outright anger at being required to enroll in and complete yet another requirement in their divorce process (an 8 or 12-hour Parents Forever™ course). This appeared to be due to the fact that this was a new requirement and the subject matter was unfamiliar to them along with some new or different vocabulary, such as "coparent" and "parenting time," versus "the ex-" and "visitation."

As the years have gone by and the Parents Forever™ course became more common among persons completing the course, accompanying research showed that people actually were benefiting from the material, and many times they reported that this is a course that would have benefited them prior to their divorce process. Also, as the demographics of the classes changed, we were seeing more single, never-married parents in the classes, which changed the dynamics and perceptions. This demographic shift challenged instructors to be more inclusive in their language and methods.

As mentioned earlier, the term "coparent" required a big perception and attitude change for a lot of participants. They realized that this process of making a parenting plan was not going to necessarily be a one-time experience, and that truly they were going to be "parents forever," which may include a new set of skills and definitely a new way of thinking or the development of a "new normal." Today, the term "coparent" is becoming better understood and more commonly used in a number of settings.

Another more recent piece of research that has been released, discussed and taught to practitioners is called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). This research describes the detriment of toxic stress experienced by children living with ACEs (learn more about ACEs here). This has a huge relevancy to this article since parental divorce and separation are one of the categories of ACEs and could also influence other ACEs, such as domestic violence, neglect and chemical dependency. Coparent education classes are meant to reduce the stress of the divorce and separation process for adults, thereby aiding the parents in reducing the negative stress (of an ACE) for the children and maintaining good parenting behaviors. This has been my experience in hands-on work with parents, children and families.

Related to this *eReview* article, two items are critical to the solution for immediate and long-term effects of ACEs. The first is the importance of "social capital" in helping children maintain and

strengthen resilience – the ability to "bounce back" and "bounce forward" despite a negative or high risk life experience. The presence of significant, caring, connected, relational and unconditionally loving adults, such as parents and extended family, is a key protective factor. This is a topic in coparenting curriculum that is traditionally covered.

The second item related to ACEs mentioned reflects on the importance of continued and connected involvement of fathers in the lives of children. Absent fathers are another ACE in the expanded research of ACE categories, including having an incarcerated parent – who is much more likely to be a father than mother. In the 40-plus years of the "fatherhood movement" it still appears that society is justifying the importance of fathers in the lives of children for both sons and daughters. Emotional childhood wounds due to absent fathers are a lifelong issue that is often repeated (when the child grows up) if not resolved or "healed" by the wounded male.

A section of this *eReview* article nicely addresses the learner, the facilitator and the learning environment. As an instructor working primarily with adult learners the past 10-15 years, this section also highly resonated with me through its reference to research related to the classroom environment, comments about the facilitators and their motivation to teach, and important skills for facilitators to possess, such as the ability to care and listen. Although not an absolute requirement for facilitators, being able to empathize with learners and, if possible, convey personal experiences with issues such as divorce or separation, coparenting, or simply raising children, all seem to help in the facilitator/student relationship.

Other important considerations I have found for adult learners include: adequate space to lay out materials and personal belongings, breaks, snacks, extra handouts and/or resources, pocket folders for materials, introductions, basic classroom rules (e.g. listening, cell phones turned off, no side-talking, etc.). Students should be encouraged to

practice "little steps" of good self-care (e.g. stretch if needed, use restrooms as needed, and so forth). Questions should be encouraged while staying on task. Emphasize that this is an education course, not a therapy group. Encourage group members to honor and respect privacy. "What is said in the group stays in the group." And, finally, if someone in the group has a special need or concern, to be available for one-on-one consultation before or after the group or during breaks.

Two areas for continued or new research in coparent education come to mind. One would be to measure the levels of conflict or differences lessened by coparenting education, and to consider offering the curriculum to interested parents prior to their process beginning (i.e. when they're first considering a divorce or break-up). Over the years of teaching Parents Forever™, I have frequently heard students make the comment: "This is something that I wish would have been available before our divorce/separation."

The second area of new research to consider would be in the area of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and how coparenting education may reduce "toxic stress" related to parental divorce or other type of separation. Some of the past longitudinal research done on the impact on children revealed the continuing impact on children of their parents' divorce or separation later in life, even into their 30's and 40's. The impact included health and relationship issues. Reducing the number of divorces and separations for parents probably would have the greatest impact on the above followed by more cooperative, peaceful coparenting.

Additionally, I believe research greatly benefits from hearing from coparents following their divorce or separation who have successfully completed coparenting education. Hearing from past students would provide valuable information on what topics these parents found most helpful in the course, such as anger and stress management, coparenting plans, communication skills for conflict management, resiliency-building strategies and skills, or self-care skills. The majority of parents I've encountered appear to be searching for help and strategies to navigate the major life-changing event for themselves and their children. Others, unfortunately, take it as merely a "bump on the road of life" and move on to the next relationship.

As I mentioned in my earlier comments and thoughts, it appears that the demographics of coparenting classes is changing. More never married parents who have children together are entering the legal system for resolution to parental conflict. This is something that some resisted from the very beginning and did not want "the system" involved. Also, culturally diverse groups of parents such as new immigrants also are appearing in coparenting classes. This trend comes with language, custom and cultural barriers, not to mention unfamiliarity with the U.S. legal system. Research is called for in terms of how to better meet the needs of the above described groups and communities.

A final thought, in considering the work I do professionally through FathersFIRST!, I see a great number of parents who were never married or never lived together, but have children. These include blended families and also ones that are bi-racial and culturally diverse. Some fathers in particular did not establish their legal status with their children and have not been seeing their children. This creates additional pain and hardship for all parties involved.

Again, coparenting classes could and should be addressing this population of never-married parents, with particular attention to absent fathers. This would be supportive to both parents in the

overall rearing of the children cooperatively, and of course, advantageous for the children born in these situations or relationships. So, how do we do this or what steps need to be taken educationally in a coparenting context to address this population? This could be another area for research.

Rose McCullough, Co-parent Court Navigator,
Hennepin County Co-parent Court

This *eReview* contains nearly every aspect of coparent education that we use in our program. It combines the necessary parts of research to inform a strong coparent education program, which speaks to the importance of integrating research and programming. However, there are still many holes in this content area, as well as places where coparent education programs can become more effective.

The idea of increasing non-residential father involvement in order to increase the child's well-being is one section of this article that I use (and will continue to use) in my practice. I have seen so many families benefit from having a parent come into their lives who otherwise may never have been involved. This change in the research has shifted the perspective of many courts to include the fathers in their deliberations more often. In my work, this means that we have more fathers to work with and we have to work even harder to keep those fathers involved.

There is a lot of stigma around this type of adult education so the research is necessary to back up the validity of the programs. Many parents initially think they are being told they need classes on how to parent, which causes many to avoid coming if possible. The research on creating a safe and non-judgmental environment for learning is very helpful in facilitating these groups, because it allows even skeptical parents to feel like they have a place to learn.

As this *eReview* describes, the coparent relationship is directly related to child well-being. One way I see this in practice is when a parent realizes the "social value" of the other parent. This realization will often start to increase

communication overall or increase positive communication within the coparent relationship. The positive shift in communication helps both parents to move toward a better functioning relationship with each other and with the children. The parents move past their own issues and begin to talk about the children's needs.

Involvement of both parents in child rearing also benefits the family by opening up support from extended family on both sides. There are more obvious benefits to this increased support, such as adding more positive relationships for the kids, possible childcare, etc. When using this idea in our program, however, we find that there are more covert ways this helps the family. For example, the opening of communication to extended family might help the kids get a better medical history by knowing both sides of their family. This information can be so helpful for the kids as they grow up and can benefit them through their adulthood. Oftentimes, children without a second parent lose out on this type of information.

> Involvement of both parents in child rearing also benefits the family by opening up support from extended family on both sides.

Working with both mothers and fathers in all parts of the Co-parent Court process, I see how parents learn and adapt to this new relationship. The idea of coparenting styles plays a big part in how we explain what coparenting is and how this can look different for different parents. In our program, we explain the different parenting styles (outlined in the article) and help coparents identify what style they currently use. This is a helpful tool for parents to understand their own way of interacting with the other parent before asking them what they want to change or improve.

We use this model of coparent strategies to move parents toward cooperative coparenting, which has the best results for parents, as well as the kids. We encourage the importance of a functional coparenting relationship by highlighting that the main goal of coparenting education is the child's well-being. In our coparent program we really take

the time to explain that both parents can love the child at the same time while still being a part of a coparent relationship. This shows parents that the coparent relationship affects the children directly and can make a huge difference in the family's life. Once the coparents have accepted and agreed to work on this relationship, we are able to move on to areas like identifying and increasing support and resources.

The research on facilitators and learners is very informative, and I found many ways that I incorporate these ideas when I facilitate and some that I will incorporate. One part of facilitating coparent groups that was not covered in the *eReview* article was co-facilitation.

Having two people lead these groups is essential for the facilitators and for the participants. I find that the material is better taught with a co-facilitator rather than teaching the class alone. In most classes we end up modeling a healthy cooperative relationship, which can be really important for the parents to see. I think having some research on co-facilitation in a group setting could be extremely helpful in this line of work.

Our biggest challenge in programming, however, is getting parents in the door so we can work with them in a meaningful way. This is why I encourage all unmarried parents who separate, face custody issues, or even child support issues, to go through a coparent education program. In our program, we went from being mandated by Co-parent Court to being recommended. This significantly decreases the number of participants we have coming through our program. Once the parents come, they typically realize that coparent education is not to teach how to parent but to teach ways of working

with their child's other parent. Most parents stay and benefit from the program; however, we lose too many parents before they even step in the door now that there is no way to enforce attendance.

Mandated coparent programs should be implemented, just as divorce education programs have been, in every state. Not only do we miss out on the opportunity to help these parents increase the well-being of their children, we miss out on using those experiences to add to the current research in order to create better programs. Follow-up studies on these families would be the next step in research if enough representative data can be collected from coparent education programs. The goal of these programs is ultimately the well-being of the children, so checking in with the kids is the only way to really find out how effective we are.

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