Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce

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Objectives

As a result of attending this course, participants will be able to:

1. Name the goals for the Florida State University’s new online training, “Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce.”
2. Discuss pilot test data, including feedback, parental attitudes, and parental trauma reported in research surveys.
3. Define trauma-informed co-parenting and list strategies for assisting parents in the court system overcome trauma histories and other barriers to co-parenting.
SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE

Ready to Get Started?
Start your training today!

Toolkit includes three modules

1. An Introduction to Divorce and Co-Parenting
2. Skills and Strategies for Co-Parenting
3. Self-Care, Transitions, and Safety

Coparenting.fsu.edu
Overview

The Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce Toolkit provides much-needed support to the development of research-based, multimodal intervention/prevention training for divorcing parents.

The toolkit consists of:

– Interactive Content
– Multimedia Material
– Films
– Extensive Resource Site
Overview

The toolkit has been divided into three modules with two additional modules:

- An Introduction to Divorce and Co-Parenting
- Skills and Strategies for Co-Parenting
- Self-care, Transitions, and Safety
  - Domestic Violence
  - Child Abuse
Modules

The toolkit’s modules

**Module One**
An Introduction to Divorce and Co-Parenting

**Module Two**
Skills and Strategies for Co-Parenting

**Module Three**
Self-care, Transitions, and Safety
The goals of the Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce project include the following:

- Development of a curriculum which integrates current research on co-parenting processes
- Provide a free online divorce education program that meets the state-mandated qualifications for being a parent education and family stabilization course
- Provide free resources to parents to self evaluate mental health
- Psychometric testing of a new co-parenting measure which may be an effective tool for researchers and practitioners
- Examination of the attitudes and experiences of practitioners and lawyers who work with divorcing families
- Utilization of a comprehensive evaluation plan to examine program effectiveness, adapt the program as needed, and make contributions to the extant literature
- Adapt program for application as a national resource

*Note: For additional detail on program goals see Ferraro, Malespin, Oehme, Bruker, & Opel (2016)*
Module 1: An Introduction to Divorce and Co-Parenting

Basic Elements of Co-Parenting

- Children have a good relationship with both parents.
- Both parents respond to the needs of their children.
- Parents rarely argue and never in front of the children.
- Parents do not place their children in the middle of conflicts.
Module 2: Skills and Strategies of Co-Parenting

Five Skills in Co-Parenting

- Collaboration
- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Compromise
- Consistency

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

- **Specific:** Be detailed about what it is that needs to be accomplished. No generalizing!
- **Measurable:** There should be no doubt about whether the goal is reached or not.
- **Actionable:** When writing goals, use action words such as ‘practice’, ‘quit’, ‘finish’, instead of ‘be’, ‘am’, ‘have’.
- **Realistic:** A goal should stretch a person just outside of their comfort zone, but it should not be unreachable.
- **Timebound:** Every goal needs a date to be completed by; otherwise it is just a dream.

Healthy Co-Parenting Communication Exercise

While you and your co-parent may have some issues communicating, you can work towards healthier communication through goal-setting. Choosing a few goals to work towards at a time can help you manageably reach healthier modes of communication with your co-parent.

Drag and drop six goals from the following list into the box to the right that you will try, starting today.

My Goals

1. I will keep the focus on my children in all conversations with my co-parent.
2. I will seek help from a professional, such as a counselor, divorce mediator, or pastor, to resolve parenting issues and to build an effective parenting plan.
3. I will follow the parenting plan to the best of my ability, while remaining flexible to necessary changes.
4. I will keep personal information to myself and aim to have a businesslike tone in conversations with my co-parent.
5. I will speak to my co-parent with respect and aim for compromises that make us both feel that our needs are being met.
Module 3: Self-Care, Transitions, and Safety

**Important Topics**

- Navigating complex family dynamics after divorce
- Coping with stress
- Emphasis of self-care
- Issues facing adolescents
- Information to promote safe families, free of violence
- Child abuse
- Domestic violence

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**Affirmations for Parents**

Strengthen your emotional support and encouragement through these affirmations.

**I Reassure**
- I gently reassure my children that I love them no matter what and will always be present for them.

**I Help My Children Cope Effectively**
- I find ways for my children to cope with the changes in our family in a healthy way.

**I Am Available**
- I show my children that I am available emotionally, whether that is in person, on the phone, or through texts.

**I Help My Children Feel Safe**
- I act in a way that my children feel safe and aren’t afraid of the future.

**I Protect My Children From My Own Stress**
- I take care of myself, receive support from others, and reduce my stress through healthy coping mechanisms. I do not take my stress out on my children.

**I Keep My Children Out of the Middle**
- I keep my arguments and frustrations with my children’s other parent private. I do not try to turn my children against their other parent.

**I Keep Structure and Stability**
- I help my children feel a sense of structure and stability with daily routines and household rules.

**I Take Time to Talk and Play With My Children**
- My children and I talk, listen, play, hang out, and enjoy each others company.
Module 3: Self-Care, Transitions, and Safety

**Tips for Introducing a New Partner to Your Children**

Once parents have considered all of the factors involved and made an informed decision to introduce a new partner to the child, here are a few tips for a successful introduction:

- **Start with a brief, casual meeting** before considering an overnight stay, extended visit, holiday, or trip.

- **Have an open discussion with your children** about the new partner and allow for any questions they may have.

- **Assure the children that their other parent will still be involved in their lives** and that the new partner is in no way replacing the other parent.

- **Have realistic expectations of children’s acceptance of the new partner**, and understand that children may take some time to adjust to the new partner and develop a warm relationship with him or her.
The Co-Parenting Toolkit has been approved for the following:

- Parent Education and Family Stabilization Course in Florida by the Department of Children and Families
- Continuing Legal Education Credits (3 General) by The Florida Bar, Reference Number: 1501401N
- Continuing Education Units for Clinical Social Workers, Marriage & Family Therapist, & Mental Health Counselors by the Florida Board of Clinical Social Work, Marriage & Family Therapy, & Mental Health Counseling. Course Number: #20-476253
Resources

Mental Health Professionals

- Resources for Mental Health Professionals

Cultural Competency:

- Facts regarding cultural competence
- 12 Steps to integrate into clinical practice
- Cultural competence self-test
- Cultural Competence Checklist

Tools and Techniques to Use with Divorce Clients:

- Family therapy and co-parenting
- The divorce process explained for legal and mental health professionals
- Roles mental health professionals can play for divorced clients
- Common reactions in divorce clients

Self-Care for Mental Health Professionals:

- Compassion fatigue
- 9 ways counselors can do self-care
- Counselors discuss the ways they engage in self-care
- 17 ways psychologists engage in self-care
The resource site includes 4 sections for parents, family members, mental health professionals, and lawyers, that are each unique and comprehensive in providing information on several important topics. Topics include:

- Faith-based resources
- LGBTQ+ resources
- Legal resources
- Parenting resources
- Domestic violence resources
- Child abuse resources
With collaboration from the College of Communication and Information, The Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce Toolkit features five videos as part of the multimedia material in the curriculum. The videos discuss the basics to co-parenting, the effects of divorce on children, the many emotions that divorcing parents may face, skills for talking about divorce with children, and skills for divorcing parents in conflict resolution and communication.

The videos can be accessed on the Institute’s YouTube Channel, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvoFXJGnWM2qceMjzoEVj-8ZOOymhgi8a, as well as within the course material.

The videos include:

- Introduction to Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce
- Advice to Parents from Children of Divorce
- The Truth About Divorce
- Talking to Children About Divorce
- Talking to Your Co-Parent: Two Examples to Consider
Video Links

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDAZYmZH7rQ&list=PLvoFXJGnWM2rxdOJBo5SNX6mL0Fx3-WrA&index=1
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZrAYif2cOw&index=4&list=PLvoFXJGnWM2rxdOJBo5SNX6mL0Fx3-WrA
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD5epM2aiN0&index=7&list=PLvoFXJGnWM2rxdOJBo5SNX6mL0Fx3-WrA
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZq1xyVBTuw&index=9&list=PLvoFXJGnWM2rxdOJBo5SNX6mL0Fx3-WrA
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN4mwa8e-OE&index=11&list=PLvoFXJGnWM2rxdOJBo5SNX6mL0Fx3-WrA
The Successful Co-Parenting After Divorce Toolkit was launched February 1, 2016.

Pilot data reveals:

- The Toolkit was received very well by parents. 89% of participants reported that they had learned new skills from the training, and 91% reported that the training could help parents and families adjust post-divorce.

- Findings suggest that participant assessments of the videos are correlated with an additive measure that assesses attitudes towards co-parenting behaviors, thus emphasizing the impact of viewer receptivity to the curriculum.

- Scale validation & ACES
Research and Scale Validation

• Multidimensional Co-parenting Scale for Dissolved Relationships (MCS-DR)
  – 22 items
  – 4 Subscales – Parents can learn about strengths/challenges
    • Support
    • Overt Conflict
    • Self-Regulated Covert Conflict
    • Partner-Regulated Covert Conflict
  – Response Pattern
    • 6 pt. Likert Scale (Never to Always)
Research and Scale Validation

• Development
  – Initial item pool
  – Evaluation by subject matter experts

• Psychometric Evaluation
  – Randomized Split-Half Sampling
  – Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)
  – Validity Testing
  – Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)
  – Tests for Measurement Equivalence
Research and Scale Validation

- Special thanks to our Subject-Matter Experts

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abell, N.</td>
<td>Florida State University</td>
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<td>Schoppe-Sullivan, S.</td>
<td>Ohio State University</td>
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Research and Scale Validation

• Implications
  – Assessment of co-parenting behaviors
  – Meeting the needs of parents
    • Anonymous Information Model
    • Open Information Model
What’s the Deal with ACES?

• ACEs are common...nearly two-thirds (64%) of adults have at least one.
• They are associated with adult onset of chronic disease, such as cancer and heart disease, as well as mental illness, violence and being a victim of violence.
• ACEs don’t occur alone....if you have one, there’s an 87% chance that you have two or more.
• The more ACEs you have, the greater the risk for chronic disease, mental illness, violence and being a victim of violence. People with an ACE score of 4 are twice as likely to be smokers and seven times more likely to be alcoholic. Having an ACE score of 4 increases the risk of emphysema or chronic bronchitis by nearly 400 percent, and suicide by 1200 percent. People with high ACE scores are more likely to be violent, to have more marriages, more broken bones, more drug prescriptions, more depression, and more autoimmune diseases. People with an ACE score of 6 or higher are at risk of their lifespan being shortened by 20 years.
• ACEs are responsible for a big chunk of workplace absenteeism, and for costs in health care, emergency response, mental health and criminal justice.
## ACES of Parent taking training

- **Prevalence of ACES in our sample:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACES</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>37.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Abuse</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>60.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcohol or drug abuser in household</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>71.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incarcerated household member</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>85.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Illness household member</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Intimate Partner Violence</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental divorce or death of parent</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>34.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>84.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical neglect</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community violence</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>31.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective violence</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>78.4</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of ACES</th>
<th>Total (n = 255)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>65 (25.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>79 (31.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>111 (43.5%)</td>
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ACES & Co-parenting

- Relationship between MCS-DR dimensions and the number of ACES parents have:

*Regression analyses predicting co-parenting behaviors based upon number of ACES*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Overt Conflict</th>
<th>Self-Regulated Covert Conflict</th>
<th>Partner-Regulated Covert Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of ACES (β)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
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*One-Way ANOVAs predicting co-parenting behaviors based upon ACES group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCS-DR Factors</th>
<th>0-3 ACES M (SD)</th>
<th>4-6 ACES M (SD)</th>
<th>7+ACES M (SD)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>3.72 (1.42)ₐ</td>
<td>3.63 (1.32)ₐ</td>
<td>3.80 (1.41)ₐ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overt Conflict</td>
<td>2.72 (1.29)ₐ</td>
<td>3.35 (1.34)ₐ</td>
<td>3.40 (1.40)ₐ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Regulated Covert Conflict</td>
<td>1.73 (0.75)ₐ</td>
<td>1.99 (0.83)ₐₜ</td>
<td>2.10 (1.01)ₐ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner-Regulated Covert Conflict</td>
<td>2.23 (1.09)ₐ</td>
<td>2.51 (1.13)ₜₐ</td>
<td>2.75 (1.25)ₜ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACES & Co-parenting

• Regression Results
  – Support is not a significant correlate with the number of ACES parents experience
  – However, all 3 forms of conflict are significantly related to the number of ACES

• ANOVA Results
  – Again, Support did not vary significantly across Low, Medium, or High segments of ACES
  – Overt conflict is significantly higher for parents with more than 4 or more ACES compared to those with 3 or fewer ACES
  – Both forms of covert conflict are significantly higher for parents with 7 or more ACES compared to those with 3 or fewer
Implications of Research

• 17 States require mandatory co-parenting classes for all divorcing parents
• 15 others provide judges with discretion to determine who should be ordered into co-parenting classes
• A cookie-cutter approach does not ask about parent’s strengths or challenges
Implications of Research

• Mental Health Issues
  – Depression
  – Anxiety
  – PTSD
  – ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) What we know about the brain!

These issues matter!
Implications of Research

• How can we help parents & children?

• A young child’s vulnerability and needs can trigger unconscious fear, anger, distress, and memories of abandonment in a parent with unresolved trauma.

• Unresolved trauma may lead to reenacting behaviors, which may affect choice of partners.

• Parents with unresolved trauma are at a higher risk for maltreating their children the way that they were maltreated.

• Healthy Parents = Happier children

Trauma-Informed Co-Parenting

• How do we provide trauma-informed co-parenting
  – Ensure that trainers have information about trauma and its effects
  – Ensure that parents are sensitively provided information about ACES and mental health issues
  – Find ways to help parents deal with their trauma
  – A healthy parent is a better co-parent!
Implications of Research

• Parents should be given information about their strengths and challenges

  – This scale can identify where parents are strong (low conflict, high cooperation) or where they need help (covert conflict, triangulation)

  – Parents can be given resources

  – Can find out why they are struggling

  – Can be referred to assistance

  – But beware the litigation!
Implications of Research

• Understanding our parents co-parenting relationships
  – Support ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.38$)
  – Overt Conflict ($M = 3.27, SD = 1.39$)
  – Self-Regulated Covert Conflict ($M = 1.97, SD = 0.90$)
  – Partner-Regulated Covert Conflict ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.19$)

• Previous research has suggested that the presence of each of these dimensions has implications for the well-being of parents and children$^1$; as such interventions that target co-parenting relationships and existing issues known to impact co-parenting relationships are important

Implications of Research

• Overcoming discovery problems
  – Parents need to know that their answers can’t be used against them: FLA. STAT. § 61.21(8) (2015)
  – [l]nformation obtained or statements made by the parties at any educational session required under this statute shall not be considered in the adjudication of a pending or subsequent action, nor shall any report resulting from such educational session become part of the record of the case unless the parties have stipulated in writing to the contrary.
Implications of Research

Other states, such as Minnesota, make it clear that statements made by a party during a parent education program are inadmissible as evidence for any purpose, including impeachment, and that parent education instructors may not be subpoenaed or called as witnesses. West Virginia also protects the confidentiality of parents who participate in divorce education sessions and specifies that the only information that can be provided to the court is the number of sessions that the parent completes.

See also New Jersey (“All communications made by any program participant during the course of attending the program are confidential and shall not be admissible as evidence in any court proceeding.”) N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2A:34-12.2 (1999).

- MD. CODE FAM. LAW §7–103.2(e)
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