

## Parenting Through Divorce - Phase I Final Report

Grant # 1R43HD050021-01A1

Laura Backen Jones, Ph.D., Principal Investigator -- Phase I Project Period: 04-10-06 - 12-31-07

### PROJECT TASKS

1. **Preliminary development.** Convene development team to draft an outline of the content and create a design for program delivery. The central aim of this project was to create a parenting program uniquely tailored to meet the needs of mothers and fathers during divorce. The program targeted factors known to moderate the effects of risk factors on children's outcomes and relies on interactive multimedia to present **skill-based** video demonstrations. The evaluation activities were included to demonstrate the feasibility of an online multimedia divorce-education parent-training program. Our first task was to develop content material for use in the prototype program. The Principal Investigator and the in-house development team, along with the consultants who provided input on content: (a) determined learning objectives for the program, (b) drafted an outline of program content, and (c) created an instructional design for program delivery based on social cognitive theory.

2. **Input from direct and indirect consumers.** We held two separate formative focus groups and five individual expert key informant interviews. The aim of these activities was to inform program development, including gaining information about the social validity of the planned program. Social validity assessments were included in the formative stage by collecting information from direct and indirect consumers of the program: separate focus groups of mothers and fathers and interviews with expert key informants. Information regarding program relevance, acceptability, feasibility, sustainability, and ease of integration were collected. In addition to the key informant interviews, the Principal Investigator was invited by the AFCC to present on this Phase I **Parenting Through Divorce** project at their **Seventh International Congress on Parent Education and Access Programs**. At that conference, the PI established connections with key professionals in the field - many of whom gave information that helped shape the Phase I program. This visit also led to the development of many contacts (including members of the key informant panel) that continue to influence development of the program; this relationship will also help in the recruitment of Phase II study participants, and will ultimately benefit commercialization and dissemination of the program (see letters of support).

**Parent Focus Groups.** We solicited feedback from our target population, the parents. Since the first year following separation is the most disruptive to family functioning, we wanted to gain information from parents in the midst of the divorce experience so that we might craft the program in a way that best meets their needs, with respect to both content and accessibility. We also included parents who had some distance from the divorce process because we believed that they would offer a retrospective view on what **would have been** most helpful to them. We asked similar questions from mothers and fathers, and gathered information to help us create a program that was sensitive to the needs of both sexes. Each focus group met for 1.5 hours. The Principal Investigator, an experienced moderator, facilitated the meetings. Methods adhered to guidelines developed by Krueger (1994): determine the questioning route, carefully recruit participants, use a skillful moderator, analyze the focus group sessions, and report the results. After the focus groups convened, we analyzed their responses by observing levels of familiarity between participants, examining patterns in the participant responses and sorting the content into content themes and sub-themes that indicate a point of view held by participants with common characteristics. We provided descriptive information on the themes or clusters of information and interpreted the information by examining how responses related to what we know from the research literature. We paid special attention to those areas in which there is substantial agreement across groups and types of participants (Krueger, 1988). The focus groups included 11 divorcing/divorced moms, six divorcing/divorced dads and one dad who never married but had a child for whom custody is in dispute. The average age of mom attendees was 37; the average age of dads attending was 38. One attendee was African-American, one Latino/Hispanic, one Asian; the remaining parents were Caucasian. Seventy-one percent of parents attending the focus group had daily access to the internet from home or work; all of the remaining parents, except for one, had access at least weekly. Parents averaged two years post-secondary education and most parents had two or three children. Mom's average level of annual income was in the \$10-20,000 range while dad's average income was between \$20 and 30,000. Parents were divided with respect to current levels of conflict: about half of the group reported very high levels of conflict while half of the group reported relatively low levels of conflict. Levels of conflict did not differ by sex.

Mothers and fathers in the midst of the divorce process gave us first-hand information about what would make the program accessible and engaging to them. Participants also engaged in an open-ended discussion about their divorce experiences, sharing anecdotes that were incorporated into the script as teaching vignettes. Across groups, child custody issues were parents' central concern and many worried about the effect of the divorce on their children. Even when discussing the added economic strain of the separation, parents emphasized that their stress related to finances did not even come close to their stress about their children's well-being. Overwhelmingly, mothers and fathers indicated that they would like to have the best possible relationship with their child(ren)s' other parent but the tension related to the divorce, particularly when attorneys were involved, was tremendous. We asked parents to identify areas in which they needed education and social support so that we could tailor the core curriculum (parenting principles with strong empirical support for their effectiveness) and the instructional delivery design to meet their needs. Parents wanted to learn more about how to hold up under the stress of the process, how to improve their relationship with their co-parent, how to help their children deal with the emotional impact of the divorce, and how to manage day-to-day parenting challenges with their children. While most parents agreed that education focusing on these topics would be important, many were not satisfied with the court-mandated 4-hour class, and expressed a need for more extensive and accessible education - one that does not add strain to their already busy days. Parents wanted educational resources that they could access on their own terms. We outlined the plan for the program and the majority of parents indicated that such a program would be very useful to them, particularly if it included a component where mothers and fathers could share online support.

**Key informant panel of experts in the field of divorce.** The expert key informant advisory panel consisted of five representatives who work directly with divorcing families and/or individuals who have academic expertise in the area of families and divorce. We had two central aims in convening the advisory panel. We: (a) were interested in creating a curriculum that was truly beneficial to parents; one that would help parents protect their children from the stresses of the divorce process and ultimately protect their children's long-term developmental outcomes, and (b) aimed to create a program that would fit easily into professional systems serving divorcing parents. With these aims in mind, we convened the following panel: (1) **Peter Salem**, Executive Director of the **Association of Family and Conciliation Courts** (AFCC), (2) **Charles Asher**, family law attorney, mediator, and developer of a web-based self-instructional program for divorcing parents called **uptoparents.org**, (3) **Jeff Measelle**, clinical psychologist whose focus is the investigation of children's social environments to predict the emergence of psychopathology, (4) **Andrew Shepard**, Director of the **Center for Children, Families and the Law**, Professor of Law and Editor of the leading family law journal, **Family Court Review**, (5) **Cyndee Haines**, Family Law Attorney, counselor, and divorce parenting educator, and (6) **Keith Crnic**, psychologist and expert in the influence of stress on child and family functioning. This same panel comprised the professional panel who evaluated the Phase 1 program.

Key Informants shared their perception of what information and support parents need most, the barriers to parents gaining access to training, and the motivational and practical factors they saw as undermining parental engagement in divorce education. They helped us shape a program that will work efficiently with typical organizational structures and were instrumental to the development team by providing formative evaluations of program content and delivery design.

### 3. **Phase I Development: Obtain and integrate consultant's feedback; develop scripts. Produce program.**

The Project Consultants - Dr. Joan Kelly, a clinical psychologist and prominent researcher in divorce and effective interventions, and Donna Austin, attorney, mediator, and manager of Lane County Family Mediation, who has extensive hands-on experience with divorcing parents and the court system, reviewed the preliminary materials for content, usability, appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity. We integrated feedback from Dr. Kelly and Donna Austin, made appropriate revisions, and finalized scripts and modules 1-3 and produced the multimedia and web materials.

The production team, under the direction of the Media Producer (Technology Coordinator, Graphic Designer, Video Director, Video Editor and Production Assistants), developed the media assets (video, text, and web). All materials were produced in-house. IRIS Media's productions are marked by a focus on realism and natural situations and by engaging viewers through action and compelling scenes rather than with - "talking heads." Video footage, instrumental in presenting modeled instruction, was filmed in natural home settings in order to provide a natural context. Actors were racially and ethnically diverse. Video materials were shot and edited on the DVCAM professional format prior to authoring and mastering to DVD. Web materials were created using Dreamweaver and Flash animation software. The web assets were produced to run on a dedicated site hosted through IRIS Ed Online service, which runs on standard platforms such as Internet Explorer, Netscape, and Mozilla.

At the end of Phase I development, we created an online training for parents with three modules: (1) Reducing Stress, (2) Keeping Children Free from Conflict, and (3) Building Your New Family. Each module contained the following components: (a) Video-driven lessons, (b) Interactive assessments, (c) Interactive mastery exercises, (d) Journaling tool, (e) Discussion forum, and (f) Printable Resources. Activities in each module took about 30 minutes to complete, for total interactivity of about 60 minutes.

### **What is the AFCC?**

The AFCC is an interdisciplinary and international association of professionals and academics dedicated to the resolution of family conflict, with a goal to develop Models Standards of Practice for divorce parent education.

AFCC has already developed Models Standards of Practice for Family and Divorce Mediators, Child Custody Evaluators and Parenting Coordinators.

AFCC members include judges, lawyers, mediators, psychologists, researchers, academics, counselors, family court commissioners, custody evaluators, parenting coordinators, court administrators, divorce parent educators and social workers.

4. **Program Feasibility:** Evaluate program effectiveness and demonstrate feasibility for Phase II. The focus of evaluation activity in this project was both on formative development and a demonstration of feasibility. Because the program was being created for divorcing mothers and fathers, we first examined the common and unique needs of divorcing mothers and fathers and we explored how best to develop a program that not only meets the needs of divorcing parents, but also fits well into existing systems of delivery for divorce parent education. Next, we conducted two evaluative activities to demonstrate the feasibility of this program: a pre-post pilot evaluation with mothers and fathers, and an evaluation by an expert professional panel. This feasibility evaluation allowed us to examine: a) the effectiveness of the materials for improving parents' knowledge, sense of efficacy and behavioral intentions concerning strategies for minimizing interparental conflict and b) whether the materials are well-accepted by both mothers and fathers, and relevant professionals. Two separate groups evaluated the program: (1) Mothers and fathers who have filed for divorce in the preceding 12 months, had a child aged 5-12, and had internet access: whether at home, at work, or through a library or school. (2) A review panel of professionals with experience and expertise in the area of families and divorce. Parents accessed the program and participated in the study assessments online. Professionals accessed the program online and completed a written evaluation.

*continued on next page*

### **Related Principal Investigators**

∴ Laura Backen Jones, Ph.D.

