The Children of Divorce Intervention Program: An Investigation of the Efficacy of a School-Based Prevention Program

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This study evaluates the effectiveness of the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP), a school-based, preventively oriented 10-week group program for fourth-grade through sixth-grade children of divorce. CODIP creates a supportive group atmosphere in which children can share divorce-related feelings, clarify common misconceptions, and reduce feelings of isolation and builds competence by teaching problem-solving, communication, and anger control skills to help children cope adaptively with challenges posed by parental divorce. Seventy-two children of divorce, in demographically matched groups, were assigned randomly to an immediate intervention (experimental) or a delayed intervention (control) group. The experimental group improved significantly more on teacher ratings of problem behaviors and competence and parent ratings of adjustment and self-reported anxiety. Group leaders also rated experimental group children as having improved significantly.

The divorce rate in the United States has increased dramatically, indeed nearly tripled, since 1960 (Report of the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1983). It is now estimated that at least 1 million children experience parental divorce annually. The stressful nature of that experience increases the likelihood of adverse effects on their psychological well-being. Because the latter point is well documented in empirical studies and reviews (e.g., Emery, 1982; Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1980; Hetherington, 1979; Kalter, 1977; Kurdek, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979), the present account is limited to several high-impact projects illuminating the psychological problems of children of divorce.

Wallerstein and Kelly's 10-year, longitudinal study of 131 children of divorce from middle-class families in Marin County, California, was based on in-depth clinical interviews with parents and children during and after the divorce, and again at 1-, 5-, and 10-year follow-up points. Although generalizations based on that work are restricted by sampling limitations, the study's in-depth longitudinal approach provides a rich repository of clinical data. Five years after the divorce, roughly 25% of the sample were adjusting satisfactorily, 50% were adjusting marginally, and 25% were still mired in serious problems (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). After 10 years, although some earlier acute symptoms had run their course, feelings of sadness, regret, and/or being different remained, as did concerns about the permanence of interpersonal relationships and risks involved in one's own future marriage (Wallerstein, 1983). The conclusion reached was that long-term adjustment to divorce depended on intrafamilial (e.g., support) variables and the ability to master a series of six hierarchical divorce-related tasks beginning at the time of the separation and continuing through late adolescence (Wallerstein, 1983). Of special note is the sensitive picture those investigators painted of developmental differences in the psychological reactions of children of divorce (Wallerstein, 1983). Latency-aged children, for example, had strong feelings of anger and problems of anger expression; they
also felt a sense of shame and of being different and isolated from peers (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) compared matched groups of 48 preschool children from divorced and intact families and, based on diverse assessment procedures, found that divorced families were characterized by more disrupted parenting and poorer parent–child relationships. Children in those families were more aggressive, disobedient, dependent, demanding, and less affectionate than peers from intact families. The latter findings support Wallerstein and Kelly’s (1975) observations with that age group.

A recent study by Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and Mcloughlin (1983) based on a national sample of 700 youngsters compared carefully matched groups of first-, third-, and fifth-grade urban, suburban, and rural children from divorced and intact families on measures of intelligence, academic achievement, social competence, and adjustment. Consistently, children of divorce did less well on teacher-rated adjustment measures, measures of skill development, school attendance and performance, popularity with peers, and locus of control. These differences remained when the effects of IQ, SES and parent education and occupation level were partialled out.

Children of divorce have also been found to be predisposed to undercontrolled aggressive behaviors (e.g., Emery, 1982; Emery & O’Leary, 1982; Felner, Stolberg, & Cowen, 1975; Felner et al., 1980; Oltmanns, Broderick, & O’Leary, 1977; Rutter, 1971; Stolberg & Anker, 1984; Tooley, 1976), although a child’s age and sex shape the specific form in which such behaviors appear. Aggressive behaviors in children of divorce contrast with the withdrawn, anxious, and depressed responses of children who experience death in the family (Felner, Ginter, Boike, & Cowen, 1981; Felner et al., 1975; Tuckman & Regan, 1966; Wallerstein, 1983). Their presence, however, suggests that preventive interventions should help such youngsters to identify and to verbalize feelings of anger and should also help to teach appropriate ways of dealing with it.

Despite rapid increases in the divorce rate and ample evidence of its adverse effects, Bloom, Asher, and White (1978) reported that there had been few controlled studies of preventive interventions for the people it touches. To fill that void, Bloom, Hodges, and Caldwell (1982) developed a 6-month preventive program for newly separated adults, based on support principles and building adaptive skills in divorce-related problem areas. Both at the end of the program and at the 30- and 48-month follow-up points, participants significantly exceeded controls in overall adjustment and in life coping skills (Bloom et al., 1982; Bloom, Hodges, Kern, & McFadden, 1985).

Recent years have also witnessed several pilot preventive interventions based primarily on support principles for children of divorce. Two such studies both involved 9 children and were evaluated impressionistically. Cantor (1977) found little evidence of positive behavior change in program children, based on parent and teacher judgments. Guerney and Jordon (1979), however, had very positive feedback from program children and parents. Although another preventive intervention for crisis children, predominantly for children of divorce (Felner, Norton, Cowen, & Farber, 1981), showed some adjustment gains for participants on teacher ratings and self-reports of anxiety, its interpretation was marred by the lack of a control group.

A recent, more ambitious, carefully evaluated program, the Divorce Adjustment Project (DAP; Stolberg & Cullen, 1983; Stolberg, Cullen, & Garrison, 1982), had two main components: (a) the Children’s Support Group (CSG), a group intervention for 7- to 13-year-old children of divorce emphasizing support and the building of communication, anger control, and relaxation skills and (b) the Single-Parent Support Group, also based on support and discussions oriented to participants as individuals and as parents. Subjects in the study consisted of pairs of divorced mothers and their children assigned either to the previously mentioned conditions alone, a combined parent and child intervention, or a no-program control group. Outcome comparisons at the end of the intervention and 5 months later indicated that children in the support group alone improved most in self-concept and that parents in the parent group alone condition improved most in adjustment. The combined condition did not yield parallel improvements (Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

The present study evaluated the efficacy of
a modified version of CSG for fourth-grade through sixth-grade suburban children of divorce. Two considerations highlight the need for such programming: (a) Divorce rates are estimated to have doubled since 1970 and tripled since 1960 (Report of the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1983) and (b) rapidly mounting research data document the negative psychological effects of divorce on children.

Although the new Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) maintained CSG's emphases on support and skill building, it (a) added an early affective component focusing on divorce-related feelings and experiences; (b) supplemented CSG's cognitive skill building units by using discussion, filmstrips, and role plays of emotionally laden divorce-related experiences; and (c) reduced the number of anger control sessions from five to three. Given the limited efficacy of DAP's combined parent-child intervention, CODIP included only a child component, limited to the age range of 9- to 12-year-olds and based on more homogeneous age subgroups than CSG used.

Method

Subjects and Conditions

Letters describing the program were sent to parents of fourth-grade through sixth-grade pupils in four suburban schools. The letters were followed by phone contacts to parents of children identified by teachers as prospective candidates and later, by meetings to describe the program in more detail to interested parents. That process identified 75 white, middle-class children with written parental consent. None was currently in any kind of treatment. The sample included 42 boys and 33 girls: 21 sixth graders, 20 fifth graders, 26 fourth graders, and 8 third graders whose parents had heard about the program and had asked that their children be included. Parents had been separated for an average of 23.6 months (range = 1-84 months).

Random within-school division of the total subject pool yielded immediate intervention (experimental, E; n = 41) and delayed intervention (control, C; n = 34) groups matched for sex, grade, length of time since the separation (i.e., 23.8 months for Es and 23.4 months for Cs), and 8 of the 10 preadjustment measures—all but the Classroom Adjustment Rating Scale factor of Acting Out and the Health Resources Inventory factor of Good Student. Because 3 subjects moved shortly after the study started, all data analyses were based on 40 Es and 32 Cs. Within the E condition, five mixed-sex subgroups were formed, each with 8 or 9 children from the same school and the same, or adjacent, grade levels. Subgroups met for 10 weekly 1-hr sessions in their home schools. After posttesting with Es and Cs was completed, children who had been Cs were seen in groups for a condensed 5-week program, a time constraint imposed by the end of the school year.

Leaders

Ten group leaders were recruited: 7 school mental health professionals, 1 psychology postdoctoral trainee, 1 advanced psychology trainee, and 1 experienced paraprofessional. Groups were co-led; no leader participated in more than one group at a time. Leaders received extensive training before the program started to increase their understanding of the effects of divorce on families and children and to acquire program- and group-facilitation skills. Weekly feedback and supervisory meetings were held for leaders during the program.

Program

The 10-session program included three major substantive blocks:1

Sessions 1-3 comprised the program's focal affective component. They sought to build support by providing children with opportunities to get to know each other and to share common experiences, including divorce-related feelings. They also focused on clarifying children's common misconceptions about divorce, encouraged talking about divorce-related anxieties, and helped children to understand how this family change affects parents' feelings and behaviors. Skits and role plays were used to facilitate the expression of feelings. Session 3 included a vivid filmstrip depicting the reality of divorce; the feelings it predisposes in children; and reasons why adults separate, including issues of attribution and blame; and concerns about the future. These early sessions were designed to catalyze expression of divorce-related feelings and the sharing of common experience; their goal was to reduce children's feelings of isolation, stigma, and being different.

Sessions 4-6 made up the program’s cognitive skill building component. Children were taught self-statements and a 5-step sequence for resolving interpersonal problems. For homework they were asked to write down specific divorce-related problems, which were later role played in solution-oriented ways. That process elicited strong expressions of feelings. Discussion of problem resolutions by group members in an empathic, supportive context further fostered group cohesion. A key distinction was made between problems beyond children's control and thus not solvable (e.g., parent reconciliation) and those within their control (e.g., appropriate ways of communicating feelings). Understanding and being able to deal effectively with the latter was designed to increase children's sense of mastery and comfort with others and thus to address one of Wallerstein's (1983) crucial psychological tasks—disengaging from parental conflict and resuming the child’s agenda.

Sessions 7-9 dealt with anger expression and control, another of Wallerstein's (1983) key psychological tasks. First, circumstances that precipitate anger and ways to identify it in ourselves and others were considered. Next, children described actual anger experiences they had had.

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1 Only a brief abstract of the program is presented here. A more detailed program outline can be obtained, at cost, by contacting the first author.
and discussed appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing anger and their consequences. Feelings of anger were thus brought into the group's shared experience, and opportunities were provided for catharsis and mutual support around divorce-related anger experiences. Alternative ways of expressing anger appropriately were considered and role played, with feedback by members on their handling. These sessions thus sought to identify natural feelings of anger precipitated by the divorce and adaptive ways of dealing with it. During the latter sessions, children began to overview the group experience as a prelude to winding down.

The last session built on the theme of evaluating the group experience, including feelings about its ending. Positive and negative aspects of the experience were considered as were ways of continuing friendships and support after the program ended.

**Measures**

Adjustment changes in children were assessed from the perspectives of teachers, parents, group leaders, and the children themselves.

**Teacher measures.** Teachers rated children's problem behaviors on the Classroom Adjustment Rating Scale (CARS; Lorion, Cowen, & Caldwell, 1975), a 41-item measure based on a 5-point severity scale (1 = not a problem and 5 = very serious problem). The CARS has three problem factors: Acting Out (10 items), Shy–Anxious (12 items), and Learning Problems (14 items). High factor and total scale scores reflect maladjustment.

Competence behaviors were assessed using the 54-item Health Resources Inventory (HRI; Gестen, 1976). Teachers rated HRI items on 5-point scales indicating how well they described a child (1 = not at all and 5 = very well). The HRI has five factors: Good Student (10 items), Adaptive Assertiveness (7 items), Peer Sociability (10 items), Follows Rules (7 items), and Frustration Tolerance (12 items), and a sum score. High factor and sum scores indicate greater competence.

**Parent measures.** Parents completed a 14-item Parent Evaluation Form (PEF) developed specifically for this study. The PEF assesses children's school performance (e.g., "Is doing well in school"), peer relationships (e.g., "Has many friends"), and feelings about the divorce (e.g., "Might feel responsible for the divorce"). All items were rated on 4-point scales (1 = very true of my child and 4 = not at all true for me) and were keyed so that high scores reflect positive feelings about the group. This measure was administered at postintervention only.

**Procedure**

Pretesting with teachers, parents, and children was completed approximately 1 week before the program started. Testing with children was done in small groups of 8–9 in the child's home school. Posttesting on all measures was done 2 weeks after the intervention ended.

**Results**

Multivariate analyses of variance (BMDP4V MANOVA), with all multivariate Fs converted from Hotelling's $T^2$ statistic, and individual variable analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were the principal statistical tools used to test the significance of group differences on the criterion adjustment variables. The following clusters were used for the main MANOVA: (a) CARS factors of Acting Out, Shy–Anxious, and Learning Problems; (b) HRI factors of Good Student, Adaptive Assertiveness, Peer Sociability, Follows Rules, and Frustration Tolerance; and (c) Harter factors of Perceived Cognitive, Social, and Physical Competence; and Self-Esteem.

All other total scores (i.e., Sum CARS and HRI, PEF, children's STAI and CASP, and GLEF) were analyzed by individual ANOVAs. The .05 level was used to establish significance for MANOVAs and ANOVAs. Results are presented separately by rater perspective.

**Teacher Behavior Rating Scales**

Differential pre–post adjustment changes for the two groups were assessed using two sepa-
rate 2 (condition) × 2 (sex) × 2 (time) MANOVAS for the three CARS and five HRI factor scores. The effect of concern was the Condition × Time (C × T) interaction. Summarized in Table 1 are pre-post means and standard deviations for both groups and C × T interactions for the MANOVAS and ANOVAS and their significance levels for all teacher-rated factor and total scores. Both MANOVAS were significant at the .01 level. The experimental group improved significantly more than did controls on 8 of the 10 teacher-rated adjustment measures including both total scale scores. The exceptions were CARS Acting Out (p < .08) and HRI Good Student, both of which showed consistent directional trends.

Child and Parent Measures

Differential pre-post changes by groups were evaluated by a similar 2 × 2 × 2 MANOVA for the four Harter factors. The MANOVA failed

Table 1
Group Preprogram (Pre) and Postprogram (Post) Means, Standard Deviations, and Multivariate and Univariate Condition × Time Interactions for Teacher-Rated Adjustment Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Experimental (n = 40)</th>
<th>Control (n = 32)</th>
<th>Condition × Time F</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARS MANOVA (df = 3, 66)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acting Out</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>13.83</td>
<td>12.65</td>
<td>17.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>5.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shy–Anxious</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>26.34</td>
<td>18.85</td>
<td>23.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>9.82</td>
<td>5.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>25.07</td>
<td>23.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>9.66</td>
<td>10.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>HRI MANOVA (df = 5, 64)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>2.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptive Assertiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
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<td>3.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>Peer Sociability</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follows Rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustration Tolerance</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.40</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<td>0.85</td>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.55</td>
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</table>

Note. CARS = Classroom Adjustment Rating Scale; HRI = Health Resources Inventory; MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance.
All univariate analyses are based on df of 1 and 68.
* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
to reach significance. Means, standard deviations, and C × T interactions based on separate ANOVAs for the STAIC, CASP, and PEF analyses are summarized in Table 2. The C × T interaction was significant at the .02 level for the STAIC, at the .001 level for the PEF, and approached significance (p < .14) for the CASP.

The 6-item (postprogram only) CAG completed by Es assessed children's feelings toward the group experience. Maximal theoretical scores were 4 for items and 24 for the total scale. Mean item and scale scores of 3.36 and 20.18, respectively, indicate that children rated the group experience favorably.

**Group Leader Measures (GLEF)**

The significance of the mean pre-to-post E group changes based on leaders' ratings was assessed by within-group t tests on change scores for Competence Total, Problem Total, and Overall scores. Presented in Table 3 are pre and post means, standard deviations, change scores, within-group ts, and significance levels for those measures. Significant (p < .001) pre-post gains were found on all three measures.

**Discussion**

The study’s main goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based, preventive program for children of divorce. Program outcome was assessed from the perspectives of teachers, parents, group leaders, and children to represent key domains of the child's current adjustment.

Program children made significantly greater adjustment gains than controls. Specifically, teachers judged them to have shown significantly greater reductions in shy-anxious and learning problems, as well as on an overall school problem index and to have improved more both on total competence and specific competencies such as peer sociability, frustration tolerance, compliance with rules, and adaptive assertiveness. Those judgments were supported by parent and group leader ratings indicating significant postprogram decreases.
in problem areas such as feelings of self-blame about the divorce and increases in competencies such as the ability to solve personal problems. Program children also reported significantly less anxiety than controls at post and tended to have less negative self-attitudes and perceptions about the divorce. One measure that did not reflect positive program change was the Perceived Competence Scale. Evidently, a 10-week intervention focusing specifically on divorce-related issues is not sufficiently powerful to produce change on relatively stable dimensions such as perceived competence and self-esteem.

The intervention was shaped by an ample generative base (Cowen, 1980) identifying psychological reactions of latency-aged children to parental divorce (Guidubaldi et al., 1983; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Stolberg & Anker, 1984; Wallerstein, 1983), for example, a sense of isolation and stigma, anger, and underdeveloped communication and problem-solving skills with respect to divorce-related problems. To help mitigate children's sense of standing alone, the intervention provided a supportive environment for sharing common feelings, problems, and experiences with kindred peers. As one child said: "This group is a safe place where I can talk about what's on my mind." In that atmosphere, children came to feel that they were not so different and certainly not alone. A mother of a group member made the same point: "It took the group to help her see that she is not strange, that she is not alone . . . and we can talk about our feelings more openly now." Participating in supportive exchanges with peers thus appeared to facilitate the expression of significant feelings and the building of significant bonds among group members.

In that supportive group context, children were able to clarify misconceptions about the divorce and to reduce their sense of responsibility for parental conflict and/or a parent's maladaptive behavior. Several parents commented specifically about decreases in their children's guilt: "That she has benefited from the program is obvious from her behavior. She has become more verbal and self-confident and has made progress away from the guilt." More broadly, the experience helped children to discuss significant personal concerns directly with their parents and led to changes in feelings and behavior that generalized positively to the home situation. One parent said: "... she has shown a greater understanding and acceptance of others . . . is laughing more, talking more openly with me . . . is much more honest with her father . . . and appears very peaceful, content, and happy."

However important a supportive environment is in helping children to identify, express, and deal with salient feelings about their parents' divorce, it may not by itself be enough to produce positive program outcomes (Cantor, 1977). Acquiring specific competencies for dealing with the concrete challenges that parental divorce poses is a co-equal need. Interpersonal problem-solving strategies, including the communication and anger control skills that the program offered, stressed a differentiation between problems that could and could not be solved and, for the latter, stressed ways of disengaging. Children applied those new learnings to a range of real current problems and evidenced prideful mastery when problems were resolved. That process, too, is illuminated by parent comment: "He has learned how to handle his problems with a little more maturity; he appears to be more confident in making decisions that he knows will satisfy him—not just what will make his friends happy." Parents made similar specific observations about children's learning adaptive ways to cope with anger and the tendency to blame parents for the divorce. Thus one parent said: "The most significant change in her [is] that she does not blame either herself or me for the divorce. She seems to be less angry and more understanding of problems and feelings in general."

In sum, the intervention's positive effects appear to reflect a combination of its support and skill building components, factors that operated similarly in Bloom et al.'s (1982) effective intervention for divorcing adults. Cited reactions of participating children and their parents suggest that the intervention produced clinically as well as statistically significant improvements.

Consideration of several of the study's important limitations can help to identify fruitful new research directions. Illustratively, little is known of the psychometric properties of several of the study's key measures (e.g., the CASP and the PEF). More important, because the
criterion battery consisted of ratings of people with a direct stake in the program (i.e., parents, teachers, group leaders, and children), the study's positive findings may in part reflect respondents' common positive expectancies. Although that possibility cannot be discounted, several considerations qualify it. For example, other divorce intervention projects that have used teacher and parent ratings (Cantor, 1977) have not shown similar positive outcomes. Indeed, even in this study, the negative findings on the Harter measure suggest that one group of respondents (i.e., the children) was not responding in a haloed way. Furthermore, the teacher measures used in this study had a heavily behavioral focus. Teachers were never asked directly whether children had improved; their task was to rate specific class problems and competencies at two time points separated by several months. Their Time 1 ratings were not available to them when they did the Time 2 ratings. Finally, the judged improvement of participants at postprogram was consistent across diverse perspectives.

It is clear that (a) several of the study's key measures need further psychometric work and (b) the program's credibility base can be strengthened by using outcome measures (e.g., behavioral observations) that go beyond the judgments of the people who it touches directly.

Another future research need is to pinpoint the contribution of specific program components. Differentiating an intervention's active versus inert elements is an essential step in its ultimate strengthening. Moreover, follow-up data are needed to assess the durability and robustness of what is now known only to be short-term positive program impact. Adjustment to divorce is a multistage process in which time is an important evaluation dimension.

Finally, the generalizability of the present findings is limited by the relatively small sample of predominantly white, middle-class, suburban children whom the program served. Extending the model to older and younger children and to different sociodemographic groups are important next steps in assessing its more general utility. Effective programs for other groups will surely call for developmentally and socioculturally appropriate changes in content and method.

Those limitations notwithstanding, the present findings are encouraging. The dissolution of a marriage is, unquestionably, a painful process that imposes burdensome adjustment demands on those who are involved. By placing more than 1 million children a year at risk for adjustment problems, divorce raises concerns of national proportions. Findings from this study suggest that child maladjustment after parental divorce is not an inevitable consequence; it can be moderated or contained by informed preventive intervention emphasizing the provision of support and situationally relevant problem-solving skills.

References
CHILDREN OF DIVORCE INTERVENTION


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