

Serving the Needs of Separating and Divorcing Families: A National Survey of Extension Parenting Education Programs and Resources

Abstract

An online survey was developed to map Extension's presence in divorce education initiatives and to catalogue the amount, type, and availability of resources that each state has dedicated to meeting the needs of this parent audience. Requests for participation were sent to members on the National Extension Human Service listserv and resulted in representation from 48 out of 50 states and one U. S. territory. Results document a national presence, outline the nature and expression of Extension divorce education programs, and suggest a direction for future collaboration related to this topic.

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Introduction

It is well established that the time surrounding the ending of a marriage, the dissolution of a household, and the subsequent reorganization into a bi-nuclear family is a time marked by profound changes and stressful transitions for parents and children alike. Both groups experience great physical, economic, and psychological distress as they attempt to sort out and adjust to their new roles, relationships, and life circumstances (Amato, 2010; Deutsch, 2008; Pedro-Carroll & Reynolds, 2000). Oftentimes, the period of adjustment surrounding a divorce is associated with confused, uncoordinated, or inconsistent parenting; inattention, under-attention or over-attention to children; and previously unknown levels of parent-child discord. The situation becomes more problematic when inter-parental and parent-child conflicts continue to go unresolved (Grych, 2005; Booth & Amato,

2001).

In the mid 1980s, in response to a growing recognition of the personal and societal costs of divorce, many family and conciliation courts adopted proactive strategies to help families negotiate the interpersonal and legal conflicts that frequently accompany the dissolution of a marriage. The most prevalent intervention was and continues to be mandatory education programs for divorcing parents. These programs, with variations in number of classes, content, methods, and materials, were designed to provide parents with information and skills to decrease inter-parental conflict and promote children's adjustment (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Grych, 2005; Arbuthnot, 2002). They have been positively received by parents and court personnel (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999) and have shown some degree of efficacy (Hughes & Kirby, 2000).

Less prevalent and less studied are programs for children of divorcing and separating parents. Unlike parent programs, they are more likely to be voluntary in nature and community-based rather than court-affiliated. The majority of children's preventative programming is psycho-educational in disposition and content, focusing primarily on the healthy expression of feelings and the development of coping skills for elementary school-age children. Some programs, in attempting to normalize the divorce experience, teach children methods for handling parental expressions of conflict and include age appropriate information about the legal process (Pollett, 2009; Pedro-Carroll, 2005).

Background

Given Extension's cadre of family scholars and practitioners; its long and distinguished history of service to children, youth, and families; and its wealth of free or low-cost electronic and print media on topics that strengthen family relations, one would expect to find a strong and system-wide response to the needs of divorcing and separating families. Yet a review of the *Journal of Extension* finds only nine divorce-related entries. Five of the citations spotlight parent education programs, with three of these articles reporting on county or state use of well-known curricula for divorcing couples e.g., *Children In the Middle*, *Parents Forever* (Collins & Fetsch, 2009; Dworkin, & Karahan, 2005; Gaydos, Schwietermann, & Zimmer, 1999) and two articles focusing on curricula for couples in stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Higgenbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2010). The remaining four articles describe programs for children of divorce (Johnson, 2000; Keil, Kelbaugh, & Wilson, 1995) and the development of divorce-related print resources for adults (Davis, 1993; Davis & Furry, 1986).

During the 2009 Extension Human Sciences Network Conference, a work group of 16 Family Specialists met to discuss the current nature and future direction of Extension's programs for divorcing families. Acting upon the interests expressed and the direction set at this meeting, an online survey was developed to:

1. Map Extension's presence in national divorce education initiatives;
2. Understand Extension's level of engagement in providing divorce education programs; and
3. Determine the level of interest and direction for future Extension collaboration.

Methodology

A questionnaire consisting of 36 single- and multiple-response questions was designed to assess the following: the extent of Extension's engagement in mandatory or prescribed programs of education for divorcing parents and their children; the programmatic features of said programs (e.g., content, duration, cost); the availability of other forms of educational resources (e.g., pamphlets, factsheets, DVDs); and the degree of interest in coordinating Extension's divorce education initiatives. The questionnaire was then translated using Zoomerang[®] into an online survey. It was pilot-tested and revised based upon the responses and suggestions of 15 participants from the Parenting and Divorce Workgroup of the Extension Human Science Network during the summer of 2009. The research was designated as exempt from review by the University of West Virginia's Institutional Review Board.

The survey was officially launched on the National Extension Human Service listserv on September 15, 2009 via an email announcement of the study and a request for participation. The EHSN listserv reaches 213 subscribers who function primarily in the areas of human development and family life. The surveys were forwarded by some of the original recipients to their colleagues, so we are unable to provide the exact number of survey recipients. Data collection continued until May 24, 2010, and three additional requests for participation were issued to encourage a system-wide response. The first request occurred in November at the 2009 National Council for Family Relations (NCFR) Extension pre-conference meeting. The second request occurred in February 2010, when the original email announcement/reminder was reissued through the National Extension Human Service listserv, and the third request for participation began in April 2010, when the researchers placed phone calls to Extension specialists or administrators in states from which no response had been received. These efforts resulted in representation from 48 out of 50 states (96%) and one response from a U. S. territory.

Results

Respondents

One hundred sixteen (n = 116) Extension colleagues, working in 48 states and 1 American territory, responded to the requests for participation. Fifty-three respondents held the position of county agent or field faculty (46%), 44 reported their role as state specialist (38%), six indicated that they were program leaders (5%), three held an administrative position (2%), and 10 respondents checked "Other" (9%).

Because data were to be analyzed on a state-by-state basis, it was necessary to have only one primary respondent per state. In circumstances where there were multiple state respondents, preference was given to those most likely to know the status of a statewide mandate for divorce education programming as well as the state Extension's role in responding to it. Primary respondents were selected using the following position hierarchy: state specialist in the family life specialty arena, state administrator, program leader, county faculty, or other respondent. Table 1 shows the breakdown of primary state respondents by Extension position.

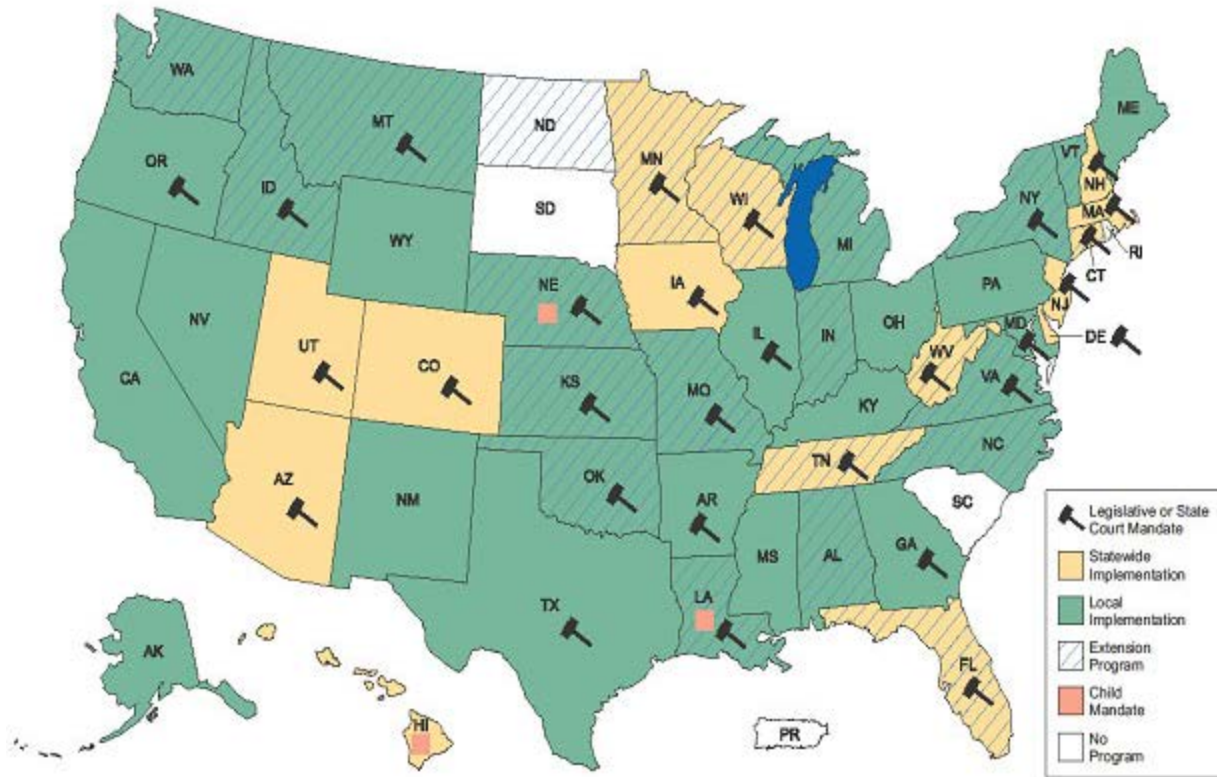
Table 1.
 Extension Positions of State
 Survey Respondents

State Specialist	33
State Administrator	2
Program Leader	2
County Faculty	7
Other	5
Total # of Respondents:	49

Mandated Programs

Forty-six of the 49 respondents provided information about the status of mandated programs for separating or divorcing parents of minor age children within their state or U.S. territory. Participants reported that in 19 of the states (41.3%), the mandate was statewide, and in the other 27 states (58.7%) the program mandate was local and was enforced only in certain counties or court districts or for certain judges. Only three states (Hawaii, Louisiana, Nebraska) were reported as having a mandate for children's programming, and the mandate was reported as being local, affecting only certain counties or parishes. South Dakota, South Carolina, and Puerto Rico reported no known program mandates. Figure 1 provides a national overview of mandated divorce education programs and Extension's involvement in 20 states.

Figure 1.
 Extension Involvement In Mandated Divorce Education Programs*

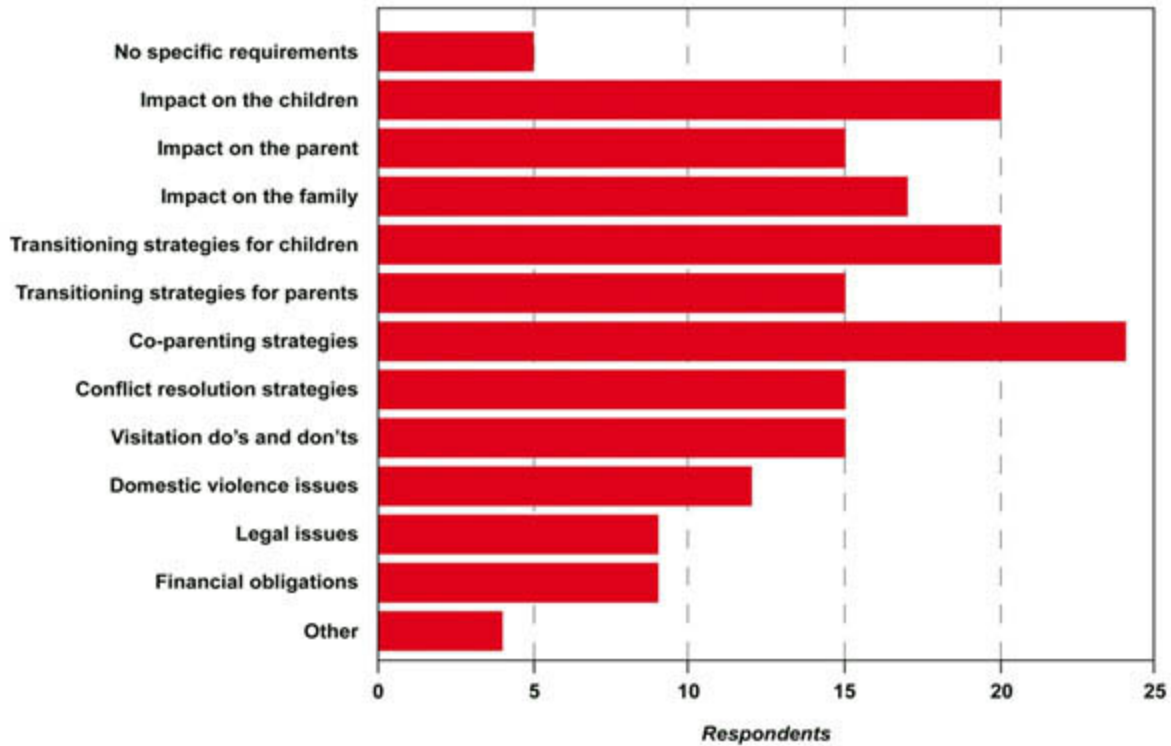


*Map illustrates legislative and judicial mandate data from Pollet & Lombreglia (2008) with an Extension program overlay.

Course Content

When responding to a question about the content requirements for the divorce education program in their state, county, or local family court, 44 of the 49 respondents indicated that specific topics or skills had to be covered in the parent education classes. As can be seen from the bar graph in Figure 2, providers typically had to present information about the impact of divorce on children and the family and to offer specific strategies that parents could use to facilitate the transition to a binuclear family structure and to be more effective in co-parenting. Fewer than 10 respondents noted a need to address legal or financial issues surrounding divorce.

Figure 2.
Content Requirement for Divorce Education Programs*



*Respondents could check multiple answers

Program Variations

Respondents from the 20 states that offer Extension divorce education programs responded to the questions concerning variations in program offerings. The data suggests that state, county, and locally mandated programs may differ in terms of the length or duration of the program to be offered as well as the amount of fees that can be charged. Table 2 highlights these differences and illustrates the points of variation reported by the respondents.

Table 2.
Variations in Mandated Parent Education Programs

Area of Difference	Featured Difference	# of Respondents
Program Length	1.0-2.5 hrs.	4
	3.0-4.5 hrs	6
	5 or more hrs.	8
	No response.	2
Program Fees	No Charge	1
	≤\$20	1
	\$21-\$40	5
	\$41-\$60	2

	\$61-\$100	1
	>\$100	1
	No Response	9

While the differences in fee structures noted in Table 2 are most likely related to the length of the course offered, respondents provided information that suggests that court-ordered stipulations such as a predetermined or set cost, fee waivers, and use of a sliding scale influenced the fees that could be charged. Only six of the respondents indicated that fees could vary by provider.

Specified Curricula Requirements

Respondents in five of the 20 states that offered divorce education programs indicated that they were required to use a specific curriculum in their parent education classes, e.g., Children in the Middle (Center for Divorce Education, 2011) in the states of Iowa and Louisiana; Parents Forever (University of Minnesota, 2011) in Nebraska and Virginia; and Families in Transition (FIT, 2011) in Vermont. Although not required to use a specific curriculum, 10 other respondents reported that they had elected to use one of the following established curricula within their parent education programs: Children in the Middle (n = 4), Parents Forever (n = 3), and Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting (University of Connecticut, 2010) (n = 3). The remaining five respondents reported offering a program that utilized lessons and activities that they themselves had developed or modified from materials that had been identified as relevant in meeting the needs of their target audiences.

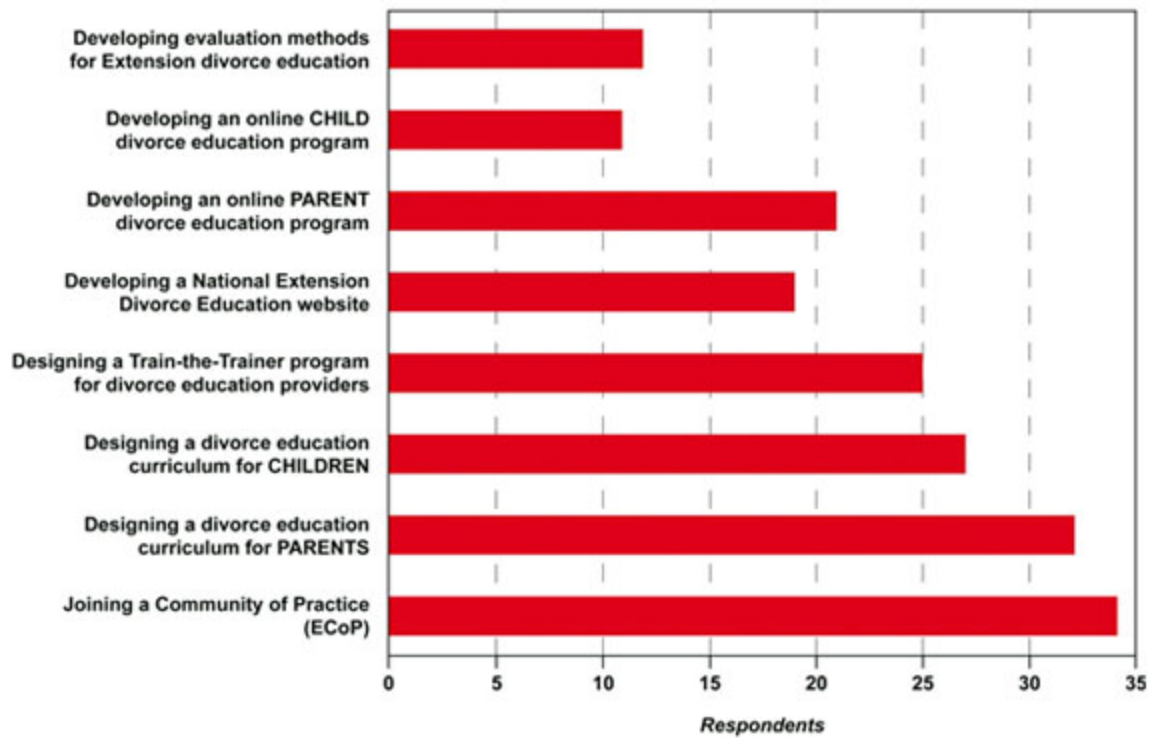
Divorce Education Resources

In addition to their mandated classes, 16 of the 20 respondents that offered divorce education programs reported offering other types of divorce education resources for parents and children. These materials included printed publications (e.g., booklets, factsheets, and annotated bibliographies) and media resources such as CDs or DVDs. Many reported that these resources were posted and available through the Web. The respondents reported that these materials were designed primarily for adult audiences, with only five states (Florida, Nebraska, Missouri, Louisiana, Tennessee) reporting having resources appropriate for children and adolescent audiences.

Interest in National Collaborative Projects

Twenty-six of the 49 survey respondents (53%) expressed interest in participating in a variety of Extension-sponsored divorce education projects. As can be seen in Figure 3, these respondents specified an interest in engaging with other Extension faculty via a Community of Practice. They also evidenced interest in designing divorce education curricula that could be used in their work with parents or children or to train others to provide divorce education programs and they endorsed the idea of developing online resources that could be posted on a national extension divorce education website.

Figure 3.
Divorce Education-Related Projects of Interest*



*Respondents could check multiple answers

Discussion

A questionnaire consisting of 36 single- and multiple-response questions was designed to assess the following: the extent of Extension's engagement in mandatory or prescribed programs of education for divorcing parents and their children; the programmatic features of said programs (e.g., content, duration, cost); the availability of other forms of educational resources (e.g., pamphlets, factsheets, DVDs); and the degree of interest in furthering Extension's divorce education resources and initiatives.

Extension faculty most likely to know the status of divorce education mandates within their state (i.e., state specialists in the family life specialty arena, state administrators, program leaders, and county faculty) were selected to provide data for the study. There were 49 respondents representing 48 states and 1 U. S. territory.

The data collected, although descriptive in nature, found the following.

1. Extension does have a presence in court-affiliated educational programs for divorcing parents and children in 20 states. The state data that was provided by 46 of the 49 respondents conforms well to the national studies that have attempted to map such initiatives (Pollet, 2009; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). It also suggests a national Extension presence and engagement in a variety of state, county, and local court-mandated divorce education initiatives.

2. Extension offers programs that are primarily designed to help adults manage emotions, learn

strategies to resolve conflict, negotiate supportive parenting plans, and support their children's transition to a bi-nuclear family structure and that few resources have been developed for children. The topical emphases and adult-centric orientation noted clearly reflect the national trend in divorce education programming (Pollet, 2009; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Grych, 2005; Pedro-Carroll, 2005; Arbuthnot, 2002).

3. Variations in topical or content emphases, program length or duration, and fee structures noted by some respondents are consistent with the literature and suggest that effort has been taken to ensure that each Extension program has been developed and tailored to fit the particular parameters established by its state, county, or local court mandate (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Grych, 2005; Arbuthnot, 2002).
4. In the arena of divorce education programming, Extension is operating from a researched-informed perspective. Extension personnel are opting to use curricula that have been proven effective in meeting established divorce education program mandates, e.g., Children in the Middle (Collins & Fetsch, 2009; Center for Divorce Education, 2011), or they are developing programs that emphasize the knowledge and skills that have been acknowledged by researchers as critical to the post-divorce adjustment of all family members (Amato, 2010; Deutsch, 2008; Pedro-Carroll & Reynolds, 2000).
5. A third of the respondents reported that they had developed a variety of educational materials (e.g., fact sheets, brochures, DVDs) to augment their programmatic offerings.
6. More than 50% of the respondents reported an interest in collaborating with other Extension professionals on divorce education-related activities, including an Extension Community of Practice, the development of a national divorce education website, and designing online courses that could be used by Extension faculty in their work with a variety of audiences.

Implications for Extension

The study reported here represents a first attempt in documenting the status of divorce education programming within the national Extension system. As is the nature of many first endeavors, the study raises more questions than it answers. While the results suggest that Extension personnel with an interest in this issue are keenly aware of legislative and judicial mandates in operation within their states, it is not known how attuned they are to what is happening nationally. Similarly, although we now know that there is an Extension presence in 20 of the 46 states with mandated divorce education programs, no data was collected on how long these programs have been in operation or to explain the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged some Extension faculty in taking steps to establish themselves as a court-affiliated partner and/or recognized community provider of divorce education programs and resources.

Likewise, while the study sheds some light on the level of Extension's engagement in providing divorce education programs (e.g., specific topics addressed within Extension programs, the duration of the course offerings, the costs attached to these programs, the existence of programmatic

idiosyncrasies), information about the nature or number of classes offered, the methods or mode of instruction used, or evidence of program efficacy remains unclear.

As a result of the study and its findings, faculty with an interest in establishing a divorce education program now know that there are Extension colleagues who have first-hand experience in establishing divorce education programs that are congruent with a variety of state statutes and local mandates. They also know that these colleagues indicate a willingness to share their insights and resources and are eager to collaborate with others in promoting divorce education initiatives. If so inclined, interested Extension faculty could use the study to frame conversations within Extension Family Specialist Work Groups or at Round Table sessions held in conjunction with national and regional conferences affiliated with the National Council for Family Relations (NCFR) or the American Association for Family and Consumer Science (AAFCS).

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