Research Proposal to Study the Effects of including Parents

In Group Interventions for Children of Divorce

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**Introduction**

The impact of divorce on children is strong, and understanding interventions to help is a growing area of research (Kelly, 2000; Rose, 2009). Children of divorce show many adjustment difficulties. Specifically, preschool age children may become overly attached or belligerent, grade school children may show new behaviors of refusing to go to school, or visiting the nurse each day with physical complaints (Kelly, 2000). Middle school and high school aged children may lack motivation in schoolwork, experiment sexually, find new social groups that bring negative influences, or engage in self-destructive behaviors (Kelly, 2000). Other commonly noted difficult behaviors and consequences are refusal to spend time with one parent, feeling guilty, becoming overburdened with household responsibilities and other odd behaviors that likely serve to meet the child’s needs (Jellinek, 2010). Increases in anxiety and depression have been noted in children associated specifically with parental divorce (Strohschein, 2005). Research suggests that this anxiety and depression is due to the divorce event, rather than simply family stress; “immediately after divorce, children in divorced families exhibit more problems in adjustment than those in high-conflict non-divorced families” (Heatheringon, 1999). Bisnaire, Firestone, and Tynard (1990) reported thirty percent of their sample had decreased academic performance after parental separation. Finally, Hans, 2001 showed a nearly unanimous desire in children of divorce to have someone to talk to about the experience. These impacts of divorce give evidence that providing interventions for this population should be a priority.

*Groups for Children of Divorce: Goals and Efficacy*

Many groups have been conducted and researched as the effects of divorce became more obvious and the numbers of impacted children grew (Hans, 2001; Kelly, 2009; Rose 2009). The
research on groups for children of divorce shows overlap and variety in the content of material covered in the groups. Families in Transition, a court mandated program, focuses on preventing and reducing depression and anxiety, as well as increasing social competencies (Rose, 2009). As reported by DeLucia-Waack and Gellman, (2007), two other groups, one using music and one not using music, had a shared set of goals to normalize the divorce experience, help children to understand the vocabulary associated with divorce, provide an environment for the child to express anger, sadness, grief, and develop problem solving skills and better ways to communicate and control anger. Results showed that the group using music had no greater impact on the anxiety, depression, and irrational beliefs about divorce of children, as compared with a similar group that did not use music (DeLucia-Waack & Gellman, 2007).

Some programs, such as the Stress Management and Alcohol Awareness Program (SMAAP), and Depression Prevention Program for Children (DPPC) have been applied to work with groups of children of divorce, and have been shown to be effective in addressing these topics in children in divorced families (Rose, 2009). An eight week group incorporating art and creative work listed goals of the groups as helping children to understand their current emotions and increasing awareness of their current family structure (Rich, 2007). Results of this study (Rich, 2007) show that children were able to release painful affect within the group, communicate more openly, and identify strengths within their family systems.

Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and Children’s Support Group (CSG) are two major programs addressing divorce. These programs teach how to cope with stressors, anger control, relaxation, and communication skills (Rose, 2009). Rose (2009) discusses The Family Studies Project. This 8 to 10 session school-based intervention sets its goals on post-divorce coping and prevention of low self-esteem and aggression. This
intervention has shown positive changes in its participants as long as four years after the group. The efficacy of these goals and groups must be considered as new groups are developed or implemented so that money and resources are used well.

McConnell, 1999 reports the results of a study looking at the efficacy of highly individualized counseling with the goals of minimizing the damage to the child of divorce by meeting emotional needs, facilitating catharsis, and increasing communication with in the family. This approach showed, with mixed effectiveness, that children who were in a counseling group had higher self-esteem than a non-counseled group, but the children in the counseling group had poorer levels of adjustment. While this study, and other mixed reviews, may be explained by unintentional group differences (hypothesized by the author as poorer relationships with mothers in the counseling group, (McConnell, 1999), it is important to measure the efficacy of interventions. This review of the literature shows variations in effectiveness of outcomes of group work. Most published research shows groups to be effective, though others show groups with only modest or no significance. Considering the number of unpublished studies with insignificant results, it seems the effectiveness of these groups needs to be considered so that correct changes in process can be made to ensure children are truly being helped in groups (Rose, 2009).

*Parental Involvement in Groups*

Many specifics of these group interventions vary. Thus, to identify the aspects of groups that work well is important. While there is past research looking at many varying aspects of groups for children of divorce, it has focused on the general efficacy of groups, and the use of specific interventions, such as music (Rose, 2009; McConnell, 1999; DeLucia-Waack&
Gellman, 2007). This review will focus on the area of parental involvement in groups. Past groups and research are varied as to what extent and how parents are involved (Rose, 2009; Rich 2007; McConnell, 1999). Some groups include parents only as much as is needed for consent, while others run corresponding groups for parents or encourage parent individual therapy simultaneously (McConnell, 1999; Rich, 2007; DeLucia-Waack, & Gerrity, 2001). Parent groups or education have focused on themes such as guiding steps to make small things easier (e.g., requesting the school send copies of report cards and announcements to both families), understanding the experience of their children, and how to handle the difficult moments, such as “handovers” (Jellineck, 2010; Rich, 2007). Other groups do not include groups for children, but provide only parent education, for example Focus on Kids, an intervention that showed some, but limited, success in helping with the experiences of children of divorce (Hans, 2001). These experiences which aim at improving the relationship are important, as one study indicates that the quality of the parent child relationship after divorce has much more effect on family adjustment, than the amount of time spent in the relationship (Neale, 2007).

**The Lifelong Impact of Divorce**

“For most children, divorce permeated their current existence” (Rich, 2007, p. 170). The impacts of divorce are far reaching, as the conflicts over money, time spent with each parent, and other issues continue to build for years (Rich, 2007). Research shows that the difficulties children face can have life-long impacts, such as unemployment, lower educational achievement, divorce, negative life events, and greater risky health behaviors by 32 years of age (Sammons, 2001; Huurre, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006). Huurre, Junkkari, and Aro (2006), also report that females from divorced families reported more psychological problems and problems in interpersonal relationships than females from non-divorced families. Holdnack (1992), reports similar
findings, that children’s long-term psychological adjustment may be effected by divorce; this is based on the findings that adults who experienced parental divorce viewed their family more disorganized and emotionally distant than subjects whose parents were not divorced.

This suggestion of family disorganization and emotional distance as a factor in the long-term effects of divorce on children supports the involvement of parents in groups to change the family environment that may cause some of the adjustment difficulties in children. Because of the long-reaching effects of divorce, follow up to families and children of divorce is important to understanding interventions, and is reflected in many groups (McConnell, 1999; DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). Rich (2007) suggests that follow up a year or more after the intervention is ideal to fully understand the effects of treatments.

Given this review of the literature, this study seeks to investigate the long term (five year) effects of a group intervention for children of divorce including parents as compared with a group intervention that does not include parents. The research questions for this study are: Will involving parents in groups for children of divorce increase the group’s impact on the child initially (at the end of the group), as compared with the group that did not include parents? Will long term (one and five year) effects on the children’s beliefs about divorce, anxiety, and depression, differ for groups involving or not including parents?

**Method**

**Sampling**

The sampling techniques used will be Systematic Random Sampling, starting by randomizing (with an excel random number process) a list of children ages 6-11 whose parents have divorced in the last 2 years, as obtained by county court records. A large number (150 or
more participants) will be collected (because of dropout rates in long term studies). This initial list will be contacted and offered a group experience aimed at helping children cope with divorce. Finally, willing participants will be randomly assigned to the parent group, or the non-parent group.

Only children ages 6-11 will be considered for this group so that the age-difference is not more than can be addressed in one group. Given the long-term nature of this study, many difficulties with participant mortality can be expected, and will be discussed in the discussion.

**Measurement**

Demographic information will be collected from both the children and parents using short forms developed by the researcher to gather basic information: age, grade and race of the child and marital status, employment status, education and race of the parent. The full measures can be found in Appendix A.

Children’s beliefs about divorce will be measured by the *Children’s Beliefs About Parental Divorce Scale* (CBADS) (Kurdek & Berg, 1987), which has six subscales measuring peer ridicule and avoidance, paternal blame, fear of abandonment, maternal blame, hope of reunification, and self-blame. The measure also gives one overall scale of level of irrational beliefs from 0-36. Kurdeck and Berg (1987) normed this measure on 84 boys and 86 girls with a mean age of 11.06. Cronback’s alphas for each subscale were between 0.54 and 0.78, and Cronback’s alpha for the scale entirely was 0.80.

The *Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale* (RCMAS) will be used to measure anxiety (Reynolds & Richmond, 1985). This scale measures three factors of anxiety, including Physiological, Worry/Oversensitivity, and Concentration. It includes 37 items that help asses
Research Proposal

anxiety such as, “I never get angry,” “I have trouble making up my mind,” and “I am always nice to people.” This measure has been normed on nearly 5,000 male and female Caucasian and African American children from ages 6-19. Wisniewski, Mulick, Genshaft, and Coury, (1987) report a test-retest validity of 0.88 for a one week delay. Reynolds, Bradley, and Steele (1980) report a 0.82 internal consistency for the entire measure. Addition, Reynolds (1985) found a strong correlation to the trait (and not state scale of the Spielberger State Trait Anxiety Scale), suggesting convergent validity.

Depression will be measured on the Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI) (Kovacs, 1981, 1992). This measure includes subscales of negative mood, ineffectiveness, negative self-esteem, anhedonia, and interpersonal problems; it includes statements such as “I hate myself,” and “I have fun in many things.” Kazdin (1994) reports test-retest reliability of 0.83 for a two week test, and internal consistency alphas were 0.8-0.94.

Design and Procedures

The design of this study is a random group assignment of children into the treatment (parents in groups) and control (parents not in group) conditions. Pre-test measures will be given, as well as three posttest measures. The measures will be the same at each collection point, including the RCMAS, CDI, and CBADS. Measures will be sent in the mail to the families with instructions to parents on how to help children complete the measures and a postage-paid envelope to return the measures to the researchers. Participants will be asked to complete the measures one week within receiving them. Reminder post cards will be sent three days after the measures are sent. After two weeks, any participants who have not returned their measures will be called on the phone.
The interventions will be several groups for children of divorce (to allow for proper group size and large sample size for the study. They will meet for the same number of weeks and the same length each week. The treatment and control versions of the group will be led by different counselors to avoid compensatory equalization of treatment. The groups will cover the same topics, but the treatment group will involve one parent in the group time. Groups will address helping children understand the divorce event, learn coping skills, and have a place to address anxiety and depression.

Data Analysis Plan

My plan for analysis is a 2 (group condition) X 4 (time) factorial design. The group condition, parents or no parents, will be the between-subjects variable, and time (pre group, post group, 1 year after group and 5 years after group) is the repeated measure.

Multivariate repeated measures of analysis of variance (MANOVA) will be used to examine the effects of the dependent measures of children’s belief about divorce, anxiety, and depression.

Discussion and Implications

Strengths and Weaknesses

The sample was designed be as generalizable as possible, by using county records, theoretically a representative number of families in each socio-economics status and ethnic groups will be given a chance to participate in the study. These factors may vary after families choose to participate, and by the end of the five year study.
This design is strong against all of the single group threats to internal validity except for testing threat; it is also strong against most of the multiple group threats. Testing threat is a concern in this design, because it has a pretest and three posttests, all using the same measures. Testing could make participants more aware of the topics being measured (their feelings of anxiety or depression). This could encourage the client to address these issues, or it could cause further anxiety and depression as clients see the difficulties they are having.

Participant mortality is a possibility, which is being planned for by recruiting a large number of participants so that the final five year group is still a substantially sized group. Additionally, whatever resources of the study allow for financial or other incentives for remaining in the study should be employed. Families’ moving, changing phone numbers, or otherwise losing contact with the researchers also seems a potential difficulty. Asking participants to notify the researchers is one potential strategy, perhaps by giving participants a postage-paid envelope or post card that is addressed and ready to notify researchers of any change in contact information.

All of the social interaction threats are a concern. Diffusion or imitation of treatment is possible, but would hopefully be limited given that the participants are being selected from the entire county, rather than one school or neighborhood. Compensatory rivalry threat is also possible, if members of the control group learn about the interventions they are not receiving, they could try to “perform” better on some of the measures. Additionally, resentful demoralization threat could lead clients to give up or feel discouraged if they realized they are not a part of the group treatments. However, given the spread of the pool of participants, these seem less likely than a study happening within one classroom. Measures will be taken for groups
to meet at different times so that each group cannot observe the differences between their experience and that of the other group.

Compensatory equalization of treatment is a possibility with this design. For example, a worker or agency unrelated to the study could realize two clients are a part of the study, but only one is in the group in which the parents are involved. This person may then feel bad and try to equalize their experiences by involving the parent in individual counseling for participant in the control group, thus influencing the results of the study.

*Implications of the study*

The results of this will give information about the impact of involving parents in interventions for children of divorce. This can help form and guide practice for these interventions. If the study shows that children’s anxiety, depression, or beliefs about divorce are better treated or prevented by involving parents in groups, this kind of group work can be encouraged with this population. It could mean that court-order programs include the parents in session, and would likely encourage schools and agencies to do the same. If the study shows that parental involvement is detrimental to the goals of the group, which too is important and will guide the future work of groups to include only children.

The significant results of the study are likely to lead replication, or studies that can look more closely at the mechanisms of the group work that lead to the results of the study. This further work, which may identify aspects such as sharing feeling with parents, or time with parents, as the aspects that lead to the difference between groups is the work that will truly lead to building the body of knowledge of assisting children of divorce.
References


Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaires

Students:

1. What is your gender?
   o Male (Boy)
   o Female (Girl)

2. How old are you? ______

3. What grade are you in? ______

Parents:

1. What is your sex?
   o Male
   o Female

2. What is your marital status?
   o Now married
   o Widowed
   o Divorced
   o Separated

3. Are you currently...?
   o Employed for wages
   o Self-employed
   o Out of work and looking for work
   o Out of work but not currently looking for work
   o A homemaker
   o A student
   o Retired
   o Unable to work

4. What is your total household income?
   o Less than $10,000
   o $10,000 to $19,999
   o $20,000 to $29,999
   o $30,000 to $39,999
5. Please specify your race.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White (Non-Hispanic or Latino)

6. Please specify the race of your child.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White (Non-Hispanic or Latino)