

Session notes

What's New and What's Working in Co-parent Education

Minnesota Fatherhood and Family Services Summit January 24, 2011

Participants:

- **Supporting Father Involvement**, Carolyn and Phil Cowan, Professors of Psychology Emeriti at the University of California, Berkeley. Evaluators of the Supporting Father Involvement study with the Office of Child Abuse Prevention for the state of California.
- **Hennepin County Co-Parent Court** Judge Bruce Peterson, 4th Judicial District Court, Rose Allen, University of Minnesota Extension, Christa Anders, Co-parent Court Project Manager, Maisha Giles and John Jackson, Co-parent Court Navigators
- **Storefront Co-parenting and Co-parenting Plus**, Tamara Statz, Transitions/Divorce Education Coordinator
- **Mediation Works North**, Lois Warner
- **Parents Forever – Moorhead, MN**, Ellie McCann, University of Minnesota Extension

Moderator:

Rose Allen, University of Minnesota Extension

Objectives:

- Identify the common themes addressed in co-parent education
- Learn effective approaches to co-parent education and how co-parent education impacts parents and children
- Learn about the various programs in Minnesota addressing co-parenting issues through education
- Look at the role of the courts in co-parent education
- Address some of the challenges of working with the families who are court ordered to take co-parent education
- Understand the role of gender, culture and marital status and how co-parent education addresses these issues
- Learn strategies you can use in your work with families

Introductions

Presenters and participants – answering the question:
Co-parent education is important because.....

- It impacts children
- A whole series of ways it impacts parents and kids
- The Cowans made a case for co-parenting
- Once you are a parent, you are always a parent
- Support, encouragement providing resources
- Kids are the future
- Gives a voice to both sides of equation
- Parents need to focus on the children

Panel

Different strategies for reaching families with co-parent education

Brief overviews of the programs represented – 10 minutes or under

Supporting Father Involvement

Carolyn and Phil Cowan

<http://www.supportingfatherinvolvement.org/cowans.html>

Responded to questions regarding their keynote presentation

The curriculum they have developed is available from "Strategies" in California –
If an agency is interested in offering something like this, they (Cowans)
would consider making the curriculum available.

See PowerPoint

Hennepin County Co-Parent Court

Judge Bruce Peterson, Rose Allen, Christa Anders, Maisha Giles and John Jackson

<http://co-parentcourt.org/>

See PowerPoint

Storefront Co-parenting and Co-parenting Plus, Tamara Statz

http://www.storefront.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B10E061EB-49A7-42E5-AC29-645F7CE48AF3%7D

See PowerPoint

Mediation Works North, Lois Warner

See web site: <http://www.mediationworksnorth.org/a/j/>

Parents Forever – Moorhead, MN, Ellie McCann

<http://www.co.clay.mn.us/Depts/Extensio/ExParFor.htm>
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/FamilyRelations/>

See PowerPoint

Panel Discussion

What is the role of the court in your co-parent education programs?

What do courts do to support programs – how do you interface with the court

- Very supportive
- Costs – employee assistance programs sometimes covers part of cost
- Support- how long of a course do you need to be effective, what kind of support can you provide.
- Court provides us with a stream of cases!
- One of the few places in the human services system where parents go together.

Do people know which classes they are “ordered” to take? Sometimes there is confusion.

What are the essential elements that need to be addressed in co-parent education?

Identify key content that your programs address

- Communication/conflict resolution
- Problem solving process/child centered decisions
- Important benefits of mothers and fathers and how they parent differently and bring different things to the child.
- Mental health, depression levels of individuals
- Families of origin – what to bring forward, what to leave behind; some families don't have a model of what a healthy family looks like.
- How to deal with, get past, the hurt, share their voice – there is a child waiting for you to get a long!
- Do we know empirically what works in these programs?
 - co-parenting emotion – regulation – Gottman
 - What we are talking about today – there isn't a lot of evidence as to what works.

What works in delivering co-parent education?

Discussion about some of the best practices in delivering co-parent education and evaluation results

Food – a place of community, somewhere in the community that they feel safe

When you compare parenting classes to co-parenting classes for outcomes -
> co-parenting wins

Innovations

What have you tried or would like to try in your delivery of co-parent education

- Establishment of paternity early and universal early referral to programs
- Liaison to help walk people through the system
- Relationship education in high school
- Parent education before you become a parent
- Family life classes should be required in high school
- Co-parenting is ripe for the child protection system

Discussion about Presumption of Joint Physical Custody

Presumption of joint physical custody – Jennifer MacIntosh

- Joint custody requires communication, flexibility, similar parenting styles
- Shouldn't be about parent rights – it should be about parental responsibility and outcomes for kids.

Putting co-parenting education into practice –

These questions were addressed in small groups using a round robin strategy where group membership changed with each question.

What strategies in co-parenting education work well at the “magic moment” – the birth of a child?

What strategies work well when kids are under age 5?

What strategies in co-parenting education work for parents who have parted ways and their child is older?

- Begin Co-parent education during pregnancy and have it follow a few months (at least) after birth.
- Both parents **MUST** complete “x” amount of co-parenting class/education before baby is released from hospital.
- Include other caring adults/caregivers (sometimes one parent is not available).
- Educating hospital staff to better educate the parents about what they are signing i.e. ROP or RDP???
- Parenting education – establish legal and physical custody

- Importance of modeling i.e. relationship, communication
- Family sessions with a licensed professional to put out emotions i.e. divorce, feelings.
- Plan before baby is born
- Determine what roles each parent will play before the baby is born
- Agree to participate before the birth
- The “magic moment” of birth is already busy and intense. Challenge of timing to bring in education option.
- Stopping/reducing maternal gate-keeping
- Social policy change: What if we had \$ that supported 2-parent involvement vs. punishment financially if dad is involved
- More dad friendly/dad focused early childhood environment
- Moms who don't list name of dad – they aren't involved.
- Bring dads in for interviews
- Need to make dads comfortable in being involved (99 % of parents involved in Headstart are moms)
- Need more men on staff
- Coffee cup at birth
- Break down maternal gate-keeping
- Financial supports need to reward the behavior we want – having dads involved
- Helping moms and others understand the importance of dads
- Dangerous dads – what constitutes dangerous? Yelling?

What different approaches work in addressing issues with fathers and mothers?

- Men do better with activities and storytelling (to get to emotions)
- Get dialogue in place to think through decisions **before** the cursory court process and rushed decisions about economic support.
- Take into consideration how the law affects their engagement with the children and the other parent.
- Acknowledging and recognizing the biases in the system with fathers.
- Recognize the fathers who are proactive and willing to work with the system – give resources for a smooth process
- Acknowledging the mother's role and responsibility they have.
- Moms- encourage self-sufficiency.
- Opportunity for both genders to be heard and respected equally - balanced
- Develop trust on both sides to approach issues.
- Engage fathers from their own communities – utilize them as co-facilitators; spread word of mouth re: programs, etc...
- Strengths based
- What is the other parent good at

- Have them think of the ex as the child's parent
- Lack of mentoring for parents – not from their own parents
- Learning styles – visual learners, videos, role play

Multiple partner fertility – how do you address these complex families?

- Help them heal/forgive so they can get to business-like communication.
- Once ready, do “family conference” type meeting to get them all together in the same place.
- Avoid comment that brings shame to situation
- Asking the mothers and fathers if they are ok being in the same place
- Having respect for both parents
- Emphasizing the strengths and good points rather than the weaknesses of everyone involved
- Professional mediation or an appointed liaison
- Establish rules and roles (who, what, why)
- Biological parent – major decision making
- Step by step parenting book by Gary Eckler
- Look at extended families for involvement, support, services
- Children should not be viewed as property
- Parenting time should be separated from child support
- Establish boundaries
- Inflammation with the new boyfriend in attendance
- Not equipped to meet their needs
- Child support \$ limited and dividing it is hard
- Emotional aspects
- May not know about other partners if they are seeking services because of one court action
- Limited amount of time to provide the information needed, lack of follow-up
- Focus on the kids
- Additional resources needed

Open Q and A

- Need to keep this moving, how do we integrate and keep this going
- Parent education – no requirements for co-parent education
- Programs in high schools – how do you do it
 - PREP, peer mediation
 - Francesca Adler-Bader
 - Make it voluntary

- Our whole lives in faith communities
- Bullying programs
- Prevention focus – how do we prevent? By intervening before problems become unmanageable
- Find out what's out there? How do we spread the word? Find curriculum that works and spread it around. Pre-natal classes, expectations
- Labor and my baby – RN does medical part, parent education does the parent education part – lost funding
- Centering Pregnancy
- Centering Parenting
- Parents means “mothers” in this culture but needs to include fathers
- Positive approach, life skills, better their lives

Thanks to Minnell Tralle, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Extension for taking notes.