

# PARENT EDUCATION: WHAT WORKS BEST?

## A REPORT OF THE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WORKGROUP A SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE STATE FAMILY LAW ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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## **I. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The SFLAC Parental Involvement Workgroup makes the following recommendations:

- Parent education should be based on the core concepts of parent attunement to children's needs and fostering healthy, post-separation parenting relationships. Content and methods should draw from a broad research base and continue to evolve.
- The court and all other professionals involved in promoting or explaining the required parent education class should make clear that the class is specifically for divorcing/separating parents (vs. a general parenting skills class) and is designed to support them through this family change. Parents of minor children at all ages should be expected to complete the class. Non-parent custodians should be encouraged to enroll if the class is able to accommodate them.
- Materials available to parents regarding parent education classes (handouts, websites, recorded phone messages, etc.) should emphasize positive messages about the benefits of the class over the negative messages about the consequences for not completing the class.
- Classes should be offered regularly to attorneys and other professionals for continuing education credit so the professionals are encouraged to keep abreast of the current curriculum and can inform their clients of the benefits as well as requirements.
- Parents should be encouraged by the court, attorneys and mediators to complete the class early in the process, and if possible, even before a court matter is filed.
- Courts should consider offering positive incentives (i.e. discounted class fee) to parents who complete the class before or within thirty days of filing or being served.

- Courts should look for ways to remove systemic barriers by supporting a timely enrollment process, reasonable class sizes, language accommodations and clear rules for protecting personal safety.
- Parents should be afforded options to complete the class in an alternative way (online, video, in another county), if it taking it in person would pose a hardship in their own county. Parents should be encouraged to supplement the required class with additional educational resources to continue to expand their knowledge.

## **II. BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION IN SUPPORT OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. AN IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY**

A parent filing for divorce, separation or other matter resulting in a parenting plan may only have one contact with a professional during the process. Parent education is the one requirement that applies to all parents whether they are co-petitioners, self-represented, work with an attorney or mediator. The class may be our only opportunity to focus parents' attention on the needs of their children during and after the separation. The importance of this intervention cannot be underestimated if we want to give children and families the best possible chance to adjust and form healthy post-separation relationships. The broader community is beginning to appreciate the importance of parental behavior on infant attachment and early childhood development. Contemporary research confirms that the choices parents make at this vulnerable time are equally critical for adolescent developmental needs. Contrary to earlier assumptions about adolescent individuation and developmental competence, new research on adolescence reveals the brain does not reach adult maturity until age 25. This information spotlights the continued vulnerability of older adolescents to family stressors and parental conflict and underscores the critical role of ongoing parental involvement and support for older

adolescents. The court needs to support and encourage parents and parental figures for children of all ages to engage in the parent education classes, rather than allow parents of older children to opt out.

## **B. THE BASICS**

ORS 3.425(b) provides a starting point for what a parent education class must include in its curriculum: (a) The emotional impact of a dissolution of marriage or a separation on children at different developmental stages; (b) Parenting during and after a dissolution of marriage or a separation; (c) Custody, parenting time and shared parenting plans; (d) The effect on children of parental conduct including, but not limited to, long distance parenting; and (e) Mediation and conflict resolution.

There is current research that gives further guidance on what educational factors can influence parents' post-separation behavior. A child-focused curriculum and the opportunity for parents to participate in the class appear to be important components, as well as the timing of the service. Several studies with skills-based parent education classes (as opposed to those that consist of mostly lecture or those that focus on inducing guilt in parents) have shown greater success.<sup>1</sup> Another study, using low re-litigation rates as a sign of positive outcome, concluded that parents who participated in parent education classes within three weeks of filing had the best outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Classes taken more than three months after filing did not affect re-litigation rates.

## **C. GETTING OUT THE MESSAGE**

Some improvements in promoting the classes can be made simply by getting the word out to parents clearly and consistently from their first contacts with support people (court staff, counselors, mediators, attorneys, paralegals, teachers, church contacts, etc.). We can encourage this effort by educating support providers and providing reminders, handouts and computer links

so that parents can be easily informed about the class. Support providers should be regularly updated on the latest class content and registration process. Some jurisdictions have been successful in offering professionals the class or a condensed version of the class for continuing education credit. If this is not practical, encouraging support people to attend a regularly scheduled class can increase that person's awareness of the content of the class so he or she can promote it in an informed and enthusiastic way.

In addition, the tone of court materials can create a positive or a negative impression upon the parent receiving the information. Those that focus on the law and rules ("NOTICE: A certificate of completion is required to finalize your case") or on the negative impact of divorce ("Workshop Goal: To help parents become aware of how their conflict hurts their children and what they can do about it") may serve to discourage interest and motivation in the parent to attend the class. Materials that offer incentives and hope for parents ("Learn how divorce or separation impacts your children and what you can do to help them") appear to promote greater interest and motivation. Materials that include the notice about the completion requirement can also incorporate a message about the positive goals of the class. This increases the likelihood that parents will see the class as an opportunity for support. Titles such as "Co-Parenting: Children in Changing Families", "Kids First", "Focus on Children" may also encourage parents to participate

#### **D. ENCOURAGING EARLY PARTICIPATION**

In light of the research affirming the importance of early participation in parent education, we should continue and expand successful methods of bringing parents into classes earlier and try new techniques to see if early turnout can be increased further.

Individual judicial districts use various operational methods to encourage early participation. The “hurdle” approach requires proof of class completion within a certain time frame or before parents can access certain other services. For example: parents must register for class within a certain number of days after filing (14 for Washington and 15 for Clatsop); parents must complete class a certain number of days before a court appearance (30 days for Coos); parents must complete class prior to attending mediation (Columbia, Coos, Curry, Grant, Klamath, Polk, Tillamook, Washington). In addition, all counties require parents (at least the petitioner) to complete the class before a judgment that includes a parenting plan can be entered. A full [index](#) of Parent Education programs and the details for each county is available on the Oregon Judicial Department’s Family Law Page and is attached as Appendix 1.

“Incentive” approaches reward early enrollment. Two counties offer an incentive if the class is taken within a certain number of days of filing or completion of service. Multnomah and Clackamas Counties both offer a \$15 discount, in Multnomah if parents register within 60 days of filing and in Clackamas if parents register within 15 days of completed service. Yamhill County is in the process of implementing a discount for parents who attend before filing or within thirty days of filing. Another possible incentive that private attorneys and mediators could offer is a discount on their services for clients who complete the class within a certain number of days of their first meeting.

#### **E. BARRIERS**

Barriers, intentional and unintentional, may exist which discourage completion of a parent education class. The cost or time commitment may be a significant obstacle. By offering fee waivers, deferrals, and sliding scale fees, the cost burden can be eased. Where the population supports it, counties offer classes at various times so that missed work or inability to find child

care is less of an issue. Language barriers can make it difficult to learn about the class and enrollment process. Lack of translation resources can make it impossible to understand the information taught in class. Classes offered in Spanish or other languages give non English-speaking parents the best opportunity to gain a full understanding of the information.

All counties have some protocol for enrolling parents in separate classes when a restraining order has been filed. If professionals who interact with parents and the written materials about the class refer to broader safety concerns, any parent who has a safety concern can understand that he or she has the option to take the class separately or to ask that other safety measures be taken.

Where access is an issue for parents, due to geographical or physical barriers, safety concerns or other significant obstacles, alternatives to in-person participation may be offered. Of the 36 Oregon judicial districts, three-quarters allow for an online or video alternative to the in-person class: four accept specific online parent education classes, twenty-one others allow them on a case-by-case basis, and another two allow a video alternative. More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of in-person vs. online or video classes.

Other barriers may discourage early participation in particular. More densely populated counties may experience enrollment wait lists or lengthier response times, i.e. delays in returning calls. Less densely populated counties may not have enough participants to cover the cost of offering classes frequently. A certificate may expire if the case is not filed within a certain time (6 months in Wallowa, for example). Some counties do not allow enrollment prior to filing (Polk and Curry, for example). In some cases the enrollment process may discourage pre-filing attendance, i.e. appearing to require case numbers and party designation on forms.

## **F. INVOLVING THE CHILDREN**

Two judicial districts in Oregon (Washington and Coos) also offer a separate class for children. Both programs serve children ages 5-17, are voluntary, and do not charge for the children's class. Washington County offers the *Kids Turn* program, which consists of four 90-minute sessions held at the same time as their parents are attending class. Coos County created their own program, which consists of four 60-minute sessions held separately from the parent class. There are some online resources for children to use directly. One excellent example comes from Canada, [www.familieschange.ca](http://www.familieschange.ca). This interactive and engaging site has one version for younger children and another for teens and preteens.

## **G. BASIC SKILLS AND HIGHER NEEDS**

A few areas of parent education are particularly difficult for parents to access in Oregon. Some parents need basic parenting skills. Outside of Juvenile Dependency court, Family Courts have not had a lot of referral information for parents in this area. Multnomah County has developed a parenting skills resource list for their website. Similarly, for high conflict parents, resources have been limited. Parents in Multnomah and Clackamas counties can be ordered to take the [Parenting Beyond Conflict](#) class. Some decide to take it on their own. In either case parents must pay privately for the class. Other states have wrestled with how to serve high conflict parents. Missouri courts have teamed up with Missouri State University to offer the Common Ground program for high conflict parents and their children. The class provides an opportunity for parents and children to learn skills to improve their relationships using drama and art as tools for learning.

## **H. THE FUTURE**

There is ample evidence that educational support helps parents look beyond simply containing conflict and setting a parenting time schedule. By focusing on the primacy of parent attunement to children's developmental and emotional needs, parents can move towards establishing and maintaining healthy post-separation parenting relationships. Zeroing in on the attitudes and behaviors that promote emotional repair and healthy restructuring can serve as a secure anchor for families in a sea of change. Seminal attachment research and recent groundbreaking developments in the neuroscience of human relationships offer insight into conditions which support children's long term well-being. The more we focus parents' attention on the essence of what will produce success and guide them to recognize their strengths, the more they will be able to develop a clear vision of their responsibilities and resources, and be empowered to act in their children's best interest.

## **III. ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Charles Martinez and Marion Forgatch, "Preventing Problems with Boy's Non-Compliance: Effects of a Parent Training Intervention for Divorcing Mothers," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69 (2001): 416-428; Mark A. Fine and John H. Harvey, eds., *Handbook of Divorce and Relationship Dissolution* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 575-604; JoAnn Pedro-Carroll and AE Black, "The Children of Divorce Intervention Program: Preventative Outreach to Early Adolescents," (Final Report to the Gottscalk Mental Health Research Grant, University of Rochester, Center for Community Study, Rochester, New York, 1993); Sharlene Wolchik, et. al., "Six Year Follow-up of Preventative Interventions for Children of Divorce: A Randomized Controlled Trial," 288 (2002): 1874-1881; Gillard, L. & Seymor, F., "Children in the Middle: A Parent Education Programme for Separated Parents," (The University of Auckland, Department of Psychology, New Zealand, April, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Jack Arbuthnot, Kevin M. Kramer, and Donald A. Gordon, "Patterns of Re-litigation Following Divorce Education," *Association of Family and Conciliation Courts FAMILY COURT REVIEW*, 35 No. 3 (1997): 269-279.