

# Use of Educational Materials to Modify Stressful Behaviors in Post-Divorce Parenting

Jack Arbuthnot  
Cindy J. Poole  
Donald A. Gordon

**ABSTRACT.** A 32-page educational booklet was mailed to half of all parents filing for divorce in one urban domestic relations court over a 12-week period. A total of 358 primarily lower-middle class intervention and wait-list control parents were interviewed by telephone approximately three months post-filing. Mothers in the treatment group reported greater reduction of loyalty conflict behaviors and increased encouragement of child-father involvement. No differences were observed between intervention and control for either mothers' willingness to share responsibility or in rate of conveyance to children of interparental conflict and personal distress. No differences were observed for father behaviors. Children exhibiting greater internalizing and externalizing behaviors on the Child Behavior Checklist (Parents) had mothers who reported experiencing greater interpersonal conflict and personal distress, and more often spoke of their difficulties to their children.

A one-year follow-up revealed that intervention parents were more likely to communicate positively with their children about their

---

Jack Arbuthnot, PhD, and Donald A. Gordon, PhD, are on the faculty and Cindy J. Poole, MS, was a graduate student in the Department of Psychology, Ohio University, Athens, OH.

This research was supported in part by grants from the Charles A. Dunklee Foundation and the Cleveland Foundation.

Address correspondence to Professor Jack Arbuthnot, Department of Psychology, Porter Hall, 200, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701.

other parent, and that nonresidential parents had greater access to their children than parents in the control conditions. The implications for this change in reducing stress in children of divorce are discussed. [Article copies available from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworth.com](mailto:getinfo@haworth.com)]

It is estimated that half of all marriages begun in the U.S. today will end in dissolution or divorce. Approximately 60% of these divorces will involve children, thereby affecting the lives of over a million and a half children each year (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1991).

Although divorce is a transient experience, its effects on children are not. Kelly's (1993) review suggests greater "externalizing problems" for divorced children. Children of divorce "exhibit more aggressive, impulsive, and antisocial behaviors, have more difficulties in their peer relationships, are less compliant with authority figures, and show more problem behaviors at school" (p. 30). "Internalizing behaviors," such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal, are often reported as more severe for children of divorce, although Kelly reports that the data are often unclear and inconsistent, perhaps due to variations across studies in age, gender, time since separation, and outcome measures.

The causes of children's poor post-divorce adjustment appear to be numerous, and vary for different families and different children. However, most studies strongly implicate parental conflict, loyalty pressures, quality of parenting, adjustment of the residential parent, access and closeness of the nonresidential parent, type of residential parenting plan, and form of dispute resolution (e.g., litigation vs. mediation) (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1992; Kelly, 1993).

Kelly cautiously notes, however, that family processes which exist prior to the divorce play a critical role in the nature of children's postdivorce adjustment, and that divorce may well exacerbate these pre-existing problems. For example, children who have modeled coping styles characterized by impulsivity and aggressiveness may rely on these to an even greater extent when the family's divorce burdens the child with additional stressors.

Regardless of whether the burdens of children of divorce originate prior to, during, or after the divorce, it is clear that most such children face serious challenges as they attempt to cope with their changed family circumstances. The question becomes one of what

services to provide and how to make them available in a format which maximizes breadth of use and impact.

### ***THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS***

Individual psychotherapy has been used to assist children experiencing emotional difficulties following divorce. Such therapy, however, is not a plausible intervention for the majority of children of divorce. First, individual therapy is costly, often making it inaccessible to lower income families. Second, parents in the midst of divorce often fail to notice their children's difficulties (Young, 1983) and therefore may not seek assistance. Third, even when assistance is offered, parents who believe their children are adjusting well are reluctant to involve them in therapy (Felner, Norton, Cowen, & Farber, 1981). Fourth, the median number of visits to individual therapists is only one (Robinson, 1991), making it highly unlikely that an adequate "dose" will be received. Finally, individual therapy does not deal with systemic problems in the home or school, and treats only the child's reactions to these problems.

Short-term group therapy and training programs seek to provide parents or children of divorce with information, training, or social support to help them cope more effectively with emotional, behavioral, and family difficulties. Although beneficial, implementation of such programs on a large scale basis is limited by the need for facilities, trained personnel, appropriate educational materials (usually video and print), and substantial funding (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1993). While a growing number of courts are mandating such parent education (Arbuthnot, Gordon, Segal, & Schneider, 1994; Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1994), the vast majority provide no services of any kind.

One solution to many of the limitations of individual therapy or group interventions would be to provide parents with brief and inexpensive but informative printed educational materials about how divorce affects children and how parents can act to prevent or ameliorate such problems. Parents can read these materials at their convenience and refer to them as needed.

## *Effectiveness of Informational Interventions*

The simple dissemination of information has been shown to effectively treat a variety of presenting problems, including depression (Schmidt & Miller, 1983), phobic behaviors (Ghosh, Marks, & Carr, 1988), behavioral problems in children (Forehand et al., 1981), and marital problems (Bornstein et al., 1984).

Little is presently known about the effectiveness of print-based materials for assisting children of divorce. To date, only three empirical evaluations of divorce-related books or guides for improving emotional or behavioral functioning of children could be located. Sheridan, Baker, and Lissovay (1984) provided 16 middle school students who had experienced parental absence or remarriage with a 12-page handbook about changing families, and a copy of *How to get it together when your parents are coming apart* (Richard & Wills, 1976). The youths attended five discussion sessions, including a viewing and discussion of the video *Family matters*. No significant differences were observed between treatment and wait-list control youths.

Ogles, Lambeth, and Craig (1991) distributed randomly one of four books about coping with loss to 64 adults who had experienced divorce or breakup. One of the books was behaviorally oriented and described strategies for coping with loss-specific symptoms and beginning new relationships (Wanderer & Cabot, 1978). Two were based on stage theories of divorce adjustment and included information regarding the adjustment process (Fisher, 1981; Kingman, 1987). The fourth focused on coping with general life crises and loss (Steams, 1984). In a comparison of pretest and posttest scores, participants reported significant decreases of psychiatric depressive and loss-specific symptoms. Improvements did not differ significantly by book.

Kurkowski, Gordon, and Arbuthnot (1994) gave divorced parents a list of situations in which children in their community felt caught in the middle of their conflict, along with instructions to monitor and minimize these situations. Relative to randomly assigned control group parents not getting such printed instructions, adolescents in the treatment group reported improvements in their parents' behaviors one month post-intervention.

## THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate an educational intervention for divorcing parents. The intervention consisted of the dissemination of a 32-page booklet (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1992) to parents who had recently filed for divorce.

The aim of the booklet is to sensitize parents to the major effects of divorce and remarriage on children (as a function of both age and gender) and to provide concrete practical suggestions for eliminating or minimizing such harmful effects, particularly parental conflict. The guide also discusses stepparenting, single parenting, the importance of continued involvement by the nonresidential parent, the effects of father absence, forms of parenting plans (custody), dealing with the legal system, and the benefits of alternate dispute resolution (vs. litigation). In addition, it provides bibliographies for technical readings and both fiction and nonfiction readings for adults and children, and sources of educational videos and support groups.

The rationale behind the intervention was that parents provided with divorce-specific educational information would be less likely to exhibit attitudes and behaviors which have been linked to poor post-divorce adjustment in children, thereby indirectly influencing their children's adjustment.

### *Hypotheses*

It was hypothesized that:

- I. Parents who were mailed the guide, in comparison to parents who were not, would (a) be more willing to share child rearing responsibilities, (b) more often engage in behaviors which mitigate loyalty conflicts, and (c) experience less interpersonal conflict with their ex-spouses.
- II. These parental attitudes and behaviors would be predictive of lower internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children.
- III. Children whose parents were mailed the guide, in comparison to children whose parents were not mailed the guide, would exhibit fewer (a) internalizing and (b) externalizing behaviors as measured by the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL-P; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983).

All differences were expected to be evident with the effects of (a) socioeconomic status and (b) the interaction of sex of the child and sex of the parent partialled out.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

All couples who filed for divorce or dissolution in one of the five domestic relations courts in Cleveland, Ohio, during a ten-week period and who met the following criteria, were eligible for participation in this study: (a) the couple had at least one child between ages 4 and 16, (b) neither parent was incarcerated, (c) both parents were able to receive materials by mail, (d) both parents were residing in the United States at the time they were contacted for participation in the study, (e) the parents were capable of being reached by telephone for a follow-up interview, (f) the parents had not reconciled by the time of the follow-up telephone interview. Assignment of cases to each of the five courts is done on a rotating basis and therefore assignment to any one court is essentially random.

The initial sample consisted of a total of 249 mothers and 213 fathers (total  $n = 462$ ). Of these, 21% (41 mothers and 57 fathers) chose not to be interviewed. Six parents could not participate either because their lawyer required that a written version of the phone interview be mailed to them for completion, or because the parent could not speak English well enough to complete the interview and a translator was not available. Thus, the final sample consisted of 206 mothers and 152 fathers (total  $n = 358$ ).

Length of separation at the time of the interview ranged from 0 (not yet separated) to 559 weeks, with the median being 24 weeks ( $M = 43.99$ ,  $SD = 61.27$ ). For 55% of the parents, the divorce or dissolution had not been finalized by the time of the follow-up interview.

Parents' levels of education ranged from eighth grade through a doctoral degree, with the median being one year of college ( $M = 13.80$  years of education,  $SD = 2.30$ ). Their median occupation level

(based on the Hollingshead Index for occupations in which "1" includes professionals such as MDs, lawyers, and officers of large businesses, and "7" includes unskilled workers) was "4" ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), which includes clerks, salespersons, and technicians.

The number of children per family ranged from one to six, with the median being two ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Of the 358 children targeted for evaluation (one per family), 187 (52%) were female and 172 (48%) were male.

### *Instruments*

1. *Child Behavior Checklist-Parent Report (CBCL-P)*. The CBCL-P (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) contains 118 items which the parent either rates on a three-point scale or responds to by listing the requested information. The checklist yields normed scores on nine behavior problem scales, two overall pathology factors (internalizing and externalizing), and three social competence scales (activities, social, and school). Higher scores are keyed to higher frequencies of occurrence and represent either greater pro-social skills or greater maladaptation. Only the internalizing and externalizing dimensions were analyzed in this study.
2. *Telephone follow-up interview*. A 35-item, 20-minute telephone interview for parents was developed for this study to assess loyalty conflicts, amount of contact with both parents, and interparental conflict.

The interviews were conducted by junior and senior undergraduate psychology majors who received four hours of training and completed practice interviews. Because one parent's negative comments about the other could potentially bias an interviewer, a given interviewer contacted only one parent in each couple. Interviewers were blind to the condition to which couples were assigned.

### *Procedure*

Approximately every other week a listing of all couples who had filed for divorce or dissolution during the previous 14 days was

supplied by the court. A table of random numbers was used to assign (1) couples to the intervention or control conditions, and (2) from each family, one child between the ages of 4 and 16 for parental evaluation.

Parents in the intervention condition were mailed a copy of the 32-page booklet *What about the children: A guide for divorced and divorcing parents* (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1992) with a letter explaining that a study was being conducted to find ways of helping families cope with divorce. Parents were not informed that an evaluation of the booklet was being conducted, but only that it was being mailed to hundreds of parents undergoing divorce proceedings and that it contained information about the effects of divorce on children and ways of reducing these negative effects. Parents in the control condition received a similar letter without mention of the booklet, nor was the booklet mailed to them.

Approximately three months (13 weeks) following each couple's filing date, parents were interviewed by telephone. The parent at whose residence the target child had slept for more than 15 nights during the prior month was designated as primary caretaker of that child. Primary caretakers, at the end of the telephone interview, were asked to complete and return a questionnaire (the CBCL-P) which would be mailed to them with a prepaid return envelope. The survey was sent with instructions that it be filled out in reference to the child who was targeted in the interview. Parents who did not return the questionnaire within 21 days of its mailing were sent a reminder with an additional questionnaire. If this second questionnaire was not returned within 14 days of its mailing, a second reminder with an additional copy of the CBCL-P was mailed.

Of the 188 mothers and 44 fathers who met the criteria for primary caretaker, one mother and three fathers asked that the questionnaire not be mailed to them. Completed questionnaires were received from 130 mothers (69%) and 15 fathers (34%). The small number of fathers who returned the CBCL-P rendered analyses on these data impractical. Therefore, fathers' CBCL-Ps were not analyzed.



## RESULTS

### *Demographic Comparisons Between Intervention and Control Groups*

Because of the difficulties in obtaining telephone numbers for a large portion of the targeted sample, preliminary analyses were completed to determine if the intervention and control groups were equivalent on all demographic variables. A MANOVA was completed with Condition (intervention or control) as the independent variable and parents' occupation, level of education, number of weeks since separation, number of weeks since the finalization of the divorce, number of children, and age of the target child as the dependent variables. The omnibus F-Test ( $F_{(6,350)} = 1.14, p > .05$ ) as well as all univariate F-tests (all  $p$ 's  $> .05$ ) were nonsignificant. The Chi-square of condition by sex of the target child was also nonsignificant [ $\chi^2(1, n = 358) = 0.03, p > .05$ ]. Thus, the intervention and control groups appear to be comparable.

### *Comparison of Respondents and Non-Respondents*

Additional MANOVA and Chi-square analyses were completed to determine if there were differences between mothers who returned the CBCL-P and mothers who did not. Dependent variables included in the MANOVA were the 23 questions from the telephone interview which were continuous in nature (e.g., loyalty conflicts, interparental conflict, parents' willingness to share childrearing responsibilities, demographics, parental level of distress, time spent with the target child, parent-child interactions, parents' perceptions of the target child's adjustment, etc.). Again, the omnibus F-test ( $F_{(22,156)} = .66, p > .05$ ) as well as all univariate F-tests ( $F_{(1,156)} < 2.66, p > .05$ ) were nonsignificant. Chi-squares completed on all dichotomous variables were non-significant: gender of the target child,  $\chi^2(1, n = 189) = 1.98$ ; parents' participation in mediation,  $\chi^2(1, n = 188) = 0.52$ ; parents' involvement in counseling/therapy,  $\chi^2(1, n = 189) = 1.18$ ; the target child's involvement in counseling/therapy,  $\chi^2(1, n = 1889) = 0.56$ ; and parents' perception of a possible return to court,  $\chi^2(1, n = 189) = 1.41$ ; all  $p$ 's  $> .05$ . Lack of

significant differences between the two groups suggest that mothers who returned the CBCL-P were not different from mothers who did not return the CBCL-P in parental attitudes and behaviors, demographics, and their evaluation of the target child's adjustment.

### *Factor Analysis of the Interview Data*

A principal component analysis (PCA) with a Varimax rotation was completed on parents' responses to all closed-ended, non-demographic questions from the telephone interview. A total of 20 items were included. Due to potential sex differences, mothers' and fathers' responses were analyzed separately.

Three interpretable factors were found for both mothers and fathers which accounted for 33% and 37% of the variance, respectively. Although two of the factors were similar across parents, the remaining factor was different enough to warrant keeping parental data separate. For mothers, the factors which resulted were:

1. *Sharing Responsibility*: willingness to share childrearing responsibilities for the child with the father and to allow the target child to spend time with their father (high scores = high willingness)
2. *Loyalty Mitigation*: mitigation of loyalty conflicts; reassuring the target child that his/her father still cares for him/her and encouraging the child to spend time with the father (high scores = high mitigation)
3. *Conflict Conveyance*: present of interparental conflict and the conveyance of the mother's personal distress to the child (high scores = high conflict and conveyance).

For fathers the factors were:

1. *Sharing Responsibility*: the father's willingness to allow mother custody and for father to share in parenting responsibilities (high scores = high sharing)
2. *Loyalty Mitigation*: father encourages the target child to spend time with mother and reassures child that the mother still cares for him/her (high scores = high mitigation)

3. *Conflict and Adjustment*: father's experience of interparental conflict and personal distress, and his perception of poor adjustment of the target child (high scores = high conflict and poor adjustment).

Scale scores were computed for each of the six parental attitude and behavior dimensions derived from the PCA by transforming raw scores for each variable into standard scores and multiplying these by their respective factor loadings.

### *Hierarchical Regression Analyses*

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were completed to determine if condition (intervention or control) was a significant predictor of mothers' and fathers' parental attitudes and behaviors and the target child's adjustment. For all hierarchical analyses, three predictor variables were entered in the following order: (1) socioeconomic status, (2) the interaction of sex of the child and sex of the parent, and (3) condition (intervention or control). This analysis partialled out any effects due to social class and any effects due to differential parental treatment of same-sex or opposite-sex children. Due to the differences in scale composition, mothers' and fathers' data were analyzed separately.

#### *Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Mothers' Data*

The criterion variables for mothers were (1) the Internalizing and (2) Externalizing scales of the CBCL-P, (3) Sharing Responsibility, (4) Loyalty Mitigation, and (5) Conflict Conveyance.

All multiple correlations with the three predictors in the model were nonsignificant (Externalizing,  $r = .14$ ,  $F_{(3,125)} = 0.88$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Internalizing,  $r = .14$ ,  $F_{(3,125)} = 0.78$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Sharing Responsibility,  $r = 0.09$ ,  $F_{(3,192)} = 0.53$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Loyalty Mitigation,  $r = .17$ ,  $F_{(3,192)} = 2.01$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Conflict Conveyance,  $r = .14$ ,  $F_{(3,192)} = 1.20$ ,  $p > .05$ ). T-test values for socioeconomic status and the interaction of sex of the target child and sex of the parent, as predictors, were also nonsignificant.

Condition emerged as a significant predictor of Loyalty Mitiga-

tion in the regression analysis and in biserial correlations, although Condition was not a significant predictor of Internalizing, Externalizing, Conflict Conveyance, or Sharing Responsibility, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Thus, mothers in the intervention condition were significantly more likely than mothers in the control condition to reassure the target child that their father still cared for them and encouraged the child to spend time with their father.

### *Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Fathers' Data*

The criterion variables for fathers were the three scales resulting from the principal components analysis: (1) Sharing Responsibility, (2) Loyalty Mitigation, and (3) Conflict and Adjustment. All multiple correlations were nonsignificant (Sharing Responsibility,  $r = 0.09$ ,  $F_{(3,135)} = 0.16$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Loyalty Mitigation,  $r = .17$ ,  $F_{(3,135)} = 1.23$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Conflict and Adjustment,  $r = .14$ ,  $F_{(3,135)} = 1.35$ ,  $p > .05$ ). T-test values for socioeconomic status, the interaction of sex of the child and sex of the parent, and Condition as predictors were also nonsignificant in each of the three analyses. Biserial correlations of condition with the three criterion variables were nonsignificant.

### *Stepwise Regression Analyses: Mothers' Data*

To determine the relationship between mothers' parenting scales and child adjustment, two additional regression analyses were completed. The Externalizing and Internalizing scales of the CBCL-P served as the criterion variables. Sharing Responsibility, Loyalty Mitigation, and Conflict Conveyance were entered stepwise as predictors (see Table 3). In both equations, Conflict Conveyance entered first and was a significant predictor of the target child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors (see Table 3). Children who exhibited greater internalizing and externalizing behaviors had mothers who frequently experienced interparental conflict and personal distress, and often conveyed these difficulties to the child. Sharing Responsibility entered second and Loyalty conflicts entered last in each of the equations and had nonsignificant T-test values (see Table 4).

TABLE 1. Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analyses on Mothers Data with all Predictors in the Model

Predictors	Inter.	Exter.	Share Resp.	Loy. Mit.	Conf. Conv.
SES					
Beta	0.02	0.08	0.06	0.05	-0.09
T-Value	0.25	0.86	-0.89	0.75	-1.29
Sig.	.80	.39	.37	.46	.20
Sex of Child X					
Sex of Parent					
Beta	-0.12	-0.12	0.02	-0.07	-0.03
T-Value	-1.40	-1.41	0.30	-1.01	-0.49
Sig.	.16	.16	.77	.31	.63
Condition					
Beta	0.05	0.01	-0.06	0.15	-0.10
T-Value	0.59	0.13	-0.88	2.12	-0.15
Sig.	.56	.90	.38	.04	.15

Note. Inter. = Internalizing scale on CBCL-P  
 Exter. = Externalizing scale on CBCL-P  
 Share Resp. = Sharing Responsibility Scale  
 Loy. Mit. = Loyalty Mitigation Scale  
 Conf. Conv. = Conflict Conveyance Scale

TABLE 2. Biserial Correlations Between Condition and Each of the Criterion Variables for Mothers Data

Criterion Variables	Biserial R	F Value	Sig. of F
Internalizing	.05	0.35	.56
Externalizing	.01	0.01	.97
Sharing Responsibility	.06	0.67	.42
Loyalty Mitigation	.15	4.37	.04
Conflict Conveyance	.10	1.78	.18

TABLE 3. Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses on Mothers Data with Conflict Conveyance, Sharing Responsibility, and Loyalty Mitigation as the Predictor Variables

Criterion Variables	Multiple R	F Value	Deg. of Freedom	Sig. of F
Internalizing	.29	3.65	3,120	.01
Externalizing	.22	2.00	3,120	.12

TABLE 4. Stepwise Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analyses on Mothers Data with Internalizing and Externalizing as the Criterion Variables

Predictors	Internalizing	Externalizing
Conflict Conveyance		
Beta	0.25	0.19
T-Value	2.84	2.11
Sig.	.01	.04
Sharing Responsibility		
Beta	-0.13	-0.07
T-Value	-1.47	-0.79
Sig.	.14	.43
Loyalty Mitigation		
Beta	-0.05	-0.09
T-Value	-0.52	-1.05
Sig.	.60	.30

### FOLLOW-UP STUDY

Approximately one year after the original study was completed, a follow-up was conducted. All parents who had completed the telephone interview and were accessible by mail at the time of the original study were selected for participation ( $n = 344$ ). Parents were mailed a letter encouraging participation in the ongoing study, a one-page questionnaire, a one-dollar token payment, and a postage-paid return envelope. The questionnaire contained twelve items which asked about time spent with the children, parent-child communication (both positive and negative), parental distress, children's adjustment, returns to court, and changes in financial support and visitation.

A total of 149 questionnaires were returned (43.3%). Of these, two were not included in the analyses because the parents had been reconciled. A third was dropped because one of the parents was incarcerated.

### *Comparison of Respondents and Non-Respondents*

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine if parents who returned the follow-up questionnaire were different from parents who did not. All questions from the telephone interview (in the original study) which were continuous in nature served as dependent variables in a MANOVA. The omnibus F-test was nonsignificant ( $F_{(22,311)} = 0.97, p > .05$ ). Of the 22 univariate F-tests, however, one was significant. Parents who returned the follow-up survey were more likely to convey feelings of personal distress to the target child ( $F_{(1,312)} = 8.62, p < .01$ ). The remaining 21 univariate F-tests were all nonsignificant.

Chi-square tests were completed on the four dichotomous variables from the telephone interview, all of which were nonsignificant (all  $p$ 's  $> .05$ ).

The finding of only one significant difference between the two groups out of 26 variables suggests that parents who returned the follow-up questionnaire were essentially the same as parents who did not.

### *Discriminant Function Analysis*

A discriminant function analysis with a Varimax rotation was completed on the twelve items from the follow-up survey. All twelve items were initially forced into the model. Items were then eliminated in a stepwise fashion in order to minimize the overall Wilks' Lambda. Although a factor consisting of five items yielded a significant discriminant function, a factor with only two items more accurately discriminated between the intervention and control groups (canonical  $r = .29, \chi^2 = 2, n = 128, = 10.87, p < .01$ ).

Correlations between the predictors and the discriminant function greater than .32 are presented in Table 5. It appears from the correlations that the items which best discriminate between the

intervention and control group are those pertaining to a positive parental relationship with respect to the children. Parents in the intervention condition talked about their ex-spouse with the children more often than parents in the control condition. Based on the correlations presented in Table 5, it appears that this communication was predominantly positive. That is, parents in the intervention condition were more likely to verbally support the children's relationship with the ex-spouse. This support of the children's relationship with the other parent was not only verbal. Nonresidential parents in the intervention condition experienced, on the average, an increase in visitation during the previous year, whereas nonresidential parents in the control group experienced a decrease in visitation.

### DISCUSSION

The present study found support for the significant role played by parental conflict in children's adjustment to divorce. Based on parental reports (CBCL-P), children exhibiting higher levels of both internalizing and externalizing behaviors had parents characterized by high levels of conflict and personal distress, and who more often spoke of these difficulties to the child (Hypothesis II). This direct involvement of the children in the ongoing problems experienced

TABLE 5. Pooled Within Group Correlations Greater than .32 Between the Items from the Follow-Up Study and the Discriminant Function.

Questionnaire Items	Correlations with Discriminant Function
<i>In the past 30 days, how many times have you talked about your ex-spouse to your children?</i>	.86
<i>In past year, has there been any change in the total amount of visitation time for the non-residential parent?</i>	.58
<i>In the past 30 days, how many times have you said things to your children that would let them know that you support their relationship with the other parent?</i>	.40



by the parents clearly has tragic consequences for the children. Unresolved and open parental conflict can only provide an enduring burden for unempowered and vulnerable children. This evidence underscores the need to provide information and training to divorcing parents—parents who may be so self-absorbed in their own pain or anger as to be either unaware of the harmful consequences of their undercontrolled animosities and need for comfort from their children, or who are aware but who lack the skills to minimize the conflict.

The other two aspects of Hypothesis II were not supported: Extent of sharing of childrearing responsibilities and engaging in loyalty conflicts were not predictive of children's difficulties. Perhaps parental reports of these parent behaviors were inaccurate during this emotional stage of divorce. Parents' ability to accurately report loyalty conflicts was questioned in a recent study in which adolescents reported significantly more frequent loyalty conflicts than did their parents (Gordon, Kurkowski, & Arbuthnot, 1993).

The distribution of a 32-page booklet with specialized information about the effects of divorce on children, including advice on preventative and ameliorative parental behaviors, plus information about forms of custody, dealing with the legal system, and various aspects of post-divorce life, produced changes in parents' reports of their behavior. As predicted in Hypothesis I.b., mothers in the treatment group reported reductions in the extent to which they put their children in loyalty binds (e.g., mothers were more reassuring that the father still cares for the child, and encouraged the child to spend time with the father).

While it is possible that the mothers were engaging in impression management after reading of the importance of this behavior change, two factors argue against this. First, there was not similar "faking good" on the other scales. Second, this emotional and verbal support by the mother of the role of the child's other parent appears to have produced real changes in post-divorce family life. The one-year follow-up study showed that nonresidential parents in the treatment group did indeed show an increase in time spent with their children, while those in the control group showed a decrease. Thus, there was long-term behavioral support for Hypothesis I.a. (even though there were not immediate changes evident in attitudes on sharing the responsibilities for child rearing). Further, this change was accompa-

nied by reports of more favorable verbal comments made by the residential parent to the child about the nonresidential parent.

The timing of the intervention—prior to the divorce decree being granted—is noteworthy. Parents may be in greatest need of helpful information when they are in the midst of the divorce process, yet at this time their receptivity may be lowest and their defensiveness highest. Having the materials in their possession may be beneficial, since optimal effects may be achieved when parents re-read the information after tensions have eased.

We found no short-term increase in parents' willingness to share child-rearing responsibilities (Hypothesis I.a.), and no decrease in reported interparental conflict (Hypothesis I.c.) as a result of the intervention. Sharing responsibility is often seen as a control issue and thus resisted in the early stages of divorce. Similarly, conflict is likely to be very high early in divorces and not easily amenable to change. More compelling interventions which specifically target these behaviors may be necessary in order to sufficiently motivate parents to make these difficult changes.

We found no treatment effects on decreases in children's internalizing or externalizing scores as reported by the CBCL-P (Hypotheses III.a. and III.b.). We suspect that such changes would be more likely to occur with reductions in parental conflict and sharing of parental distress with the children. Further, change in these dimensions may require more time than the three or four months allowed in this study (the CBCL-P was not administered at the one-year follow-up).

As a final note, it is important to note that the intervention reported here was essentially voluntary. Parents in the treatment condition did not request the materials they received, and there was no requirement that they read them. It seems reasonable to assume that many did not, thereby weakening the impact of the intervention. In an attempt to assess the extent of this problem, a postage-paid return postcard was mailed to all parents in the treatment group shortly after the follow-up study asking for an estimate of the percentage of the booklet that they actually read. Too few ( $n = 35$ ) returned the cards to include this as a covariate in the analyses. However, inspection of scores for this subset of parents strongly indicated greater change in parental behaviors with more material read.

## *Implications for Future Programs*

This study has shown that the modification of self-reported harmful behaviors by divorced and divorcing parents is possible with the simple distribution of educational materials. The effects of decreased demands for loyalty and increased contact with the absent parent (usually the father) on children's risk for a number of social, emotional, and behavior problems may be substantial. The literature cited earlier suggests that such benefits are likely to accrue from continued involvement of both parents with their children.

A serious impediment to interventions with divorcing families faced by mental health and judicial professionals alike is to find ways to provide divorcing families with information and training which are both helpful and cost effective. Therapy is expensive for the client, inconvenient, child-focused (vs. family), and rarely used—especially by low-income families. Thus, easily distributed and inexpensive written materials would be highly desirable for most courts since they are effective in changing at least some harmful parent behaviors.

The provision of reading materials, of course, does not ensure that parents will read what is provided. However, it is likely that telling parents of the demonstrated benefits for their children will increase their motivation to avail themselves of the information. And the power of the intervention effect should be strengthened considerably by incorporation of such materials into more mandated, structured educational programs for families in transition. A promising alternative in a growing (though yet small) number of communities are court-mandated parent education clinics. While such programs require both funding and considerable amounts of staff time, they are likely to be highly cost-effective in comparison to psychotherapeutic interventions.

## REFERENCES

- Achenbach, T.M., & Edelbrock, C. (1983). *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist and revised child behavior profile*. Burlington: Department of Psychiatry, University of Vermont.
- Arbuthnot, J., & Gordon, D.A. (1992). *What about the children: A guide for*

- divorced and divorcing parents*. Athens, OH: Center for Divorce Education.
- Arbuthnot, J., & Gordon, D.A. (1993). *Programs for divorcing parents: A service provider's handbook*. Athens, OH: Center for Divorce Education.
- Arbuthnot, J., Gordon, D.A., Segall, D., & Schneider, K. (1994). Court-sponsored education programs for divorcing parents: Some guiding thoughts and preliminary data. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*.
- Bornstein, P.M., Wilson, G.L., Balleweg, B.J., Weisser, C.E., Bornstein, M.T., Andre, J.C., Woody, D.J., Smith, M.M., Laughna, S.M., McLellarn, R.W., Kirby, K.L., & Hocker, J. (1984). Behavioral marital bibliotherapy: An initial investigation of therapeutic efficacy. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 12, 21-28.
- Felner, R., Norton, P., Cowne, E., & Farber, S. (1981). A prevention program for children experiencing life crisis. *Professional Psychology*, 12, 446-452.
- Fisher. (1981). *Rebuilding when your relationship ends*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.
- Forehand, R., Rogers, T., McMahon, R.J., Wells, C.C., & Griest, D.L. (1981). Teaching parents to modify child behavior problems: An examination of some follow-up data. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 6, 313-322.
- Ghosh, A., Marks, I.M., & Carr, A.C. (1988). Therapist contact and outcome of self-exposure treatment for phobias: A controlled study. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 152, 234-238.
- Gordon, D.A., Kurkowski, K., & Arbuthnot, J. (1993). *Parent-child communication after divorce: The consequences of frequent loyalty conflicts*. Unpublished manuscript. Department of Psychology, Ohio University, Athens, OH.
- Kelly, J. (1993). Current research on children's postdivorce adjustment: No simple answers. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 31, 29-49.
- Kingma, D.R. (1987). *Coming apart*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press.
- Kurkowski, K., Gordon, D.A., & Arbuthnot, J. (1993). Children caught in the middle: A brief educational intervention for divorced parents. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 20 3/4; 139-151.
- McLanahan & Bumpass. (1991). Madison: National Center for Health Statistics, University of Wisconsin.
- Ogles, B.M., Lambert, N.J., & Craig, D.E. (1991). Comparison of self-help books for coping with loss: Expectations and attributions. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 38, 387-393.
- Richards, A., & Wills, I.J. (1976). *How to get it together when your parents are coming apart*. New York: McKay.
- Robinson, D. (1990). *Therapist, supervision, and client assessment of effectiveness of outpatient mental health service*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario.
- Schmidt, M.N., & Miller, W.R. (1983). Amount of therapist contact and outcome in a multidimensional depression treatment program. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 67, 319-332.

- Sheridan, J., Baker, S., & Lissovay, V. (1984). Structured group counseling and explicit bibliotherapy as in-school strategies for preventing problems in youth of changing families. *The School Counselor*, 32, 134-141.
- Stearns, A.K. (1984). *Living through personal crisis*. New York: Ballentine Books.
- Wanderer, Z., & Cobot, T. (1978). *Letting go*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Young, D.M. (1983). *Children and divorce: New directions for child development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.