



Parental Coordination Program

A Formative Evaluation Study

Zohar Sharvit Emilia Kapranov
Yoa Sorek

Editor: Revital Aviv Matok

English translation: Evelyn Abel

Graphic design: Anat Perko-Toledano

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Myers JDC Brookdale Institute

P.O.B. 3886, Jerusalem 9103702, Israel

Tel: 02-6557400

brookdale.jdc.org.il/en | brook@jdc.org

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Abstract

Background

Families in high-conflict divorce are a matter of concern for welfare and justice services in Israel and around the world. The professional literature accumulated over the years indicates long-term adverse effects on both children and parents in these families. In Israel, the policy oversight committee at the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services on out-of-home placement and evidentiary provisions (the Silman Committee) determined that there is a dearth of appropriate responses for these families and recommended implementing the pilot program of parental coordination, a practice found worldwide. The program is implemented at centers for couple and family therapy to provide a suitable therapeutic response to families going through high-conflict divorce. The committee also recommended that the pilot program be accompanied by an evaluation study. In 2016 JDC-Israel-Ashalim asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct a formative evaluation study of the pilot program, which was implemented at six centers of couple therapy around the country. The study was conducted in 2016-19. It included the construction of a logic model that outlined the implementation steps of the program, a formative evaluation of the pilot program, and a summative evaluation in advent of the program's expansion to additional centers.

Goal

This formative evaluation study was conducted to help the heads of the pilot program adapt the Parental Coordination Program to Israeli families, to examine its implementation and outcomes, and to assist policymakers in deciding on program improvements and dissemination throughout the country.

Methodology

The formative evaluation study contained both qualitative and quantitative components. The quantitative tools were: A self-completion questionnaire for parents prior to parental coordination; a telephone interview with parents six months after the end of the intervention; and a self-completion questionnaire for coordinators (certified couples and family therapists or court-appointed social workers) on the whole family, filled in immediately after the parental coordination sessions. The qualitative tools were: Semi-structured in-depth interviews with officials at various stages of the pilot program; focus groups of coordinators; and information obtained from three open questions put to parents in the telephone interviews.

Findings

The findings from the quantitative tool indicate that in most cases, the pilot program succeeded in engaging both of the parents in high-conflict divorce to attend the joint sessions frequently and regularly. In addition, positive, significant outcomes were found on the measures of desirable outcomes among parents who participated in the coordination sessions: 87% of the families managed to reach at least one type of agreement in the course of coordination; the aspect of removing children from the parental confrontation showed improvement; there was better communication between the parents on child-rearing topics along with a decrease in negative communication between them, in negative attitudes towards each other, and in harmful, violent behaviors towards each other or towards the children. Parental applications to state and religious courts showed considerable reduction as did the involvement of the court-appointed social workers following coordination. The factors found to be predictors of successful coordination were: Participation in a coordination process without postponements; an optimal number of sessions with both parents (about 15); termination of the intervention when coordinators deem the process complete; and a level of conflict that is highly intense yet not severe.

Alongside the achievements of the pilot program, there were challenges that hampered the process of coordination and the achievement of desirable outcomes: In some 69% of the cases, the period of preparing parents for the pilot program took longer than planned; in 76%, the process was aborted before the coordinators considered it complete; 42% of the families cut short their attendance due to delays in the process and of these, 82% did not return to the program. To examine the relationship between the intensity of the conflict and the success of coordination, a clinical, statistical measure was constructed representing three levels of high-tension conflict (moderate-high, intensive, and severe). It was based on the premise that while all parents participating in the coordination process are in the throes of high-tension conflict, there are, nonetheless, different levels of severity. A significant inverse correlation was found between the top level of high-tension conflicts and the success of coordination, according to the measures of desirable outcomes. In other words, the higher and more severe the intensity of the parental conflict prior to coordination, the lower the improvement on the measures of desirable outcomes.

The findings of the qualitative components indicate that program professionals perceived the pilot program as successful in reaching even “untreatable” parents. The success is attributed to the fact that the program does not focus on the couples’ conflict per se. The factors cited by professionals as contributing to the achievement of the program goals were: The program is structured and focused, is based on clear procedures and uses varied tools to develop respectful parental communication, mediation, and problem-solving. The main challenges that emerged from the interviews were: In the view of the professionals, some of the participating families require

differential treatment and adjustments to the goals of coordination. In addition, the role of the parental coordinator was perceived as emotionally exhausting and demanding while the work of the co-coordinators may be adversely affected by the parental conflict in the coordination sessions. The analysis of the open questions revealed mixed results: Some parents voiced satisfaction with the coordination process, attributing it to, among other things, the professionalism of the coordinators and their ability to create respectful, focused discussion on the children; others expressed dissatisfaction with the process, attributing it to, among other things, the cost of the program, the inability of the coordinators to enforce decisions and agreements reached in the process, the exclusive focus on children, and the absence of individual meetings with the parents.

Recommendations

1. Take steps to avoid postponements in the process and reduce program dropout
2. Examine differential adjustments to the program goals and procedures for the various types of families, the various levels of high-tension conflict, and the varying duration of coordination
3. Take steps to implement the program more fully according to the planned model
4. Take steps to strengthen the coordinators and prevent burnout
5. Conduct a continuing study on the assimilation and implementation of the program according to the conclusions of this report