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Parents Forever: An Assessment of a Brief Divorce Education Program

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By

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## ABSTRACT

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*Parents Forever: Education for Families in Divorce Transition* is a four-hour divorce education program that is directed toward educating adults about separation, divorce, and the effects on children. While some pilot evaluations have been conducted on this program, there is still limited information regarding its effectiveness (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005). This study addressed the effects of the program for parents or caregivers who are undergoing separation or divorce. The study assessed how individuals perceived the program and its influence on their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. At the conclusion of the four-hour session, the program facilitators distributed the first retrospective questionnaire and asked the attendees to participate and answer the questions to the best of their ability. If the participants chose to continue in the study, they were sent the follow-up questionnaire in the mail approximately six weeks after completing the program. Gathering data six weeks after course completion provided information about the short-term effects of the program. Results indicated that participants perceived the program to be valuable and beneficial, and they felt the program helped them increase their knowledge on the topics covered in the workshop, as well as positively change their behavior towards their children and former partners.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Divorce continues to be a normative phenomenon in today's society. Researchers who examine the effects of divorce continue to find evidence of some negative outcomes experienced by adults and children who undergo divorce (Amato & Booth, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Some research findings have indicated that divorce can negatively affect children in a variety of domains, including aggression, behavior problems, delinquent behavior, social interactions, and academic performance (Schick, 2002; Spigelman, Spigelman, & Engleson, 1991). Additionally, the effects of divorce on adults can include depression, communication difficulties, and heightened stress (Amato, 2000). In response to the number of families who experience divorce and the potential negative outcomes for both adults and children, a range of interventions and educational programs have been created with the intent to aid in the adjustment and coping abilities of individuals affected by divorce.

Most divorce education programs focus on educating parents on how to handle situations related to the separation or divorce. Parenting programs serve a good purpose. The goals of these types of educational programs are to minimize conflict between parents, while also raising their awareness of the needs of their children who are also affected by the divorce (Whitworth, Capshew, & Abell, 2002). Such programs are further designed to educate parents on how to ease their children through the grieving processes and transitions that they may experience. In fact, in recent years the number of divorce education programs for parents has increased tremendously as more states pass laws that require divorcing

parents to attend these programs (Douglas, 2004). Parents who are undergoing separation or divorce and attend intervention or educational programs may benefit by learning how to cope, express feelings, communicate with their former partner, and appropriately handle divorce-related issues. Further, a number of programs are available that focus on educating parents about how children experience divorce and how to assist their children in managing their emotions and reactions related to the divorce (Lee, Picard, & Blain, 1994).

Divorce education programs cover a variety of topics and activities to help parents and their children cope with the family transition. Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella (1998) looked at five theoretical perspectives on divorce, remarriage, and children's adjustment. These perspectives can provide insight into how divorce education programs may actually work to benefit divorcing parents and their children. For example, one theory states that the distress parents experience during a divorce diminishes the quality of their parenting, therefore negatively affecting their children (Hetherington et al., 1998). Divorce education programs can teach parents how to appropriately manage their stress and provide them with techniques to cope with their feelings while still maintaining quality parenting practices. Another theory states that family process can impact a child's adjustment to divorce; children whose parents have little conflict and cooperatively parent their children will be able to adapt better to the changes than children whose parents engage in parallel parenting or have high conflict (Hetherington et al., 1998). Divorce education programs can be beneficial from this perspective as well, because they can teach parents how to minimize conflict and utilize cooperative coparenting strategies.

It is important to examine educational programs regarding divorce to understand whether those programs that do exist are beneficial to the individuals who participate. For

example, some research on the effectiveness of divorce education programs has found that individuals (i.e., parents or children) tend to express their feelings more freely, tend to have a higher self-esteem, and are more successful in problem solving and communication if they participated in a divorce education program (Fischer, 1999; Lee et al., 1994; Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999).

### **Statement of Need**

*Parents Forever: Education for Families in Divorce Transition* is an example of a divorce education program that is directed toward educating adults about separation, divorce, and the effects on children. This program has five interrelated program themes. Each theme is examined in specific content modules within the *Parents Forever* curriculum that are designed for two to four hours of educational instruction. The themes covered in these sessions include the impact of divorce on adults, the impact of divorce on children, legal issues and divorce, money issues and divorce, and pathways to a new life. Individuals who participate in this educational program are exposed to information about how children think about and experience the divorce and separation process. The program can be offered in a variety of educational settings, and typically is taught via the extension service, in social service agencies, or through court systems. This program, which was developed by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, is not mandated to divorcing parents in North Dakota. However, the NDSU Extension Service has partnered with local court systems and other agencies to encourage participation of divorcing adults in divorce education programming.

Although some pilot evaluations had been conducted, there was limited information about the effectiveness of the *Parents Forever* program (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005). The

program evaluations that were conducted in North Dakota prior to this research involved one post program questionnaire as the means of assessment.

In North Dakota, the NDSU Extension Service has implemented a four-hour *Parents Forever* educational program utilizing primarily one of the lesson modules in the program (i.e., The Impact of Divorce on Children). The program is offered on an ongoing basis in regional centers across the state (Fargo, Bismarck, Grand Forks, etc.). The current study evaluated the *Parents Forever* program as it is offered in the state of North Dakota. Participants came to a single educational session which lasted approximately four hours. During the session, adults and facilitators engaged in discussions and activities that related primarily to children's experience of divorce, helping children to cope, and co-parenting. Sessions were intended to focus on helping parents assist their children in managing the issues relating to divorce or separation. Key topics included: (1) stages in the divorce process, (2) grief and loss associated with divorce, (3) children's reactions at differing ages, (4) helpful coping processes for children, (5) effective communication strategies, (6) healthy parenting practices, (7) parallel parenting and co-parenting strategies, and (8) tips to following new pathways in life.

This study addressed the effects of a divorce education intervention for parents who were undergoing separation or divorce. The study assessed the participants' perceived knowledge regarding children and the divorce process, any self-reported behavior changes after participation, and participants' perceived value of the program.



## Research Questions

The main goal of this study was to investigate whether the *Parents Forever* program had any effects on the individuals who participated, and if so, what those effects were. Research questions that guided this study include:

- How do adult participants in *Parents Forever* perceive the value of the program?
- What effects does participation in *Parents Forever* have on participants' perceived knowledge regarding divorce and its effects on children?
- What impacts does participation in the *Parents Forever* program have on participants' relationships, behavior, and perceived knowledge following the program?
- What are some of the issues affecting participation in the *Parents Forever* program?

## Delimitations

Information gathered in this study was limited to individuals who participated in the *Parents Forever* program in the state of North Dakota. The study included biological parents, stepparents, or other parental figures or guardians of children exposed to separation or divorce. No individuals under 18 years of age were included in the study. The information gathered helped to evaluate the program by assessing the participants' perceptions of their knowledge and thoughts related to the program and its effects, as well as their self-reported behaviors.

## Rationale for Study

Research on divorce suggests that it is often associated with negative effects that influence the well-being of both adults and children (Amato, 2000; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Some of the educational programs that are directed at adults and children seem to

have beneficial effects on the adjustment and well-being of these individuals (Fischer, 1999; Gilman, Schneider, & Shulak, 2005; Lee et al., 1994; Pedro-Carroll et al., 1999; Sanders & Riester, 1996; Whitworth et al., 2002; Young, 1984). In fact, it has been suggested that children whose parents reduce their conflict or communication problems experience fewer negative effects in the divorce process. Therefore, adults should be encouraged to participate in educational programs that can help them in this process (Sun & Li, 2002). Based on such findings, it seems important to have these educational programs available for individuals who can receive their benefits.

Because the *Parents Forever* program had been evaluated only one time, it was important to further assess its effectiveness through a program evaluation (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005). The methods used in this program to educate adults regarding divorce may be similar to some other programs. However, this program is offered in a unique context in North Dakota and should therefore be evaluated in that specific context. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the experience of participants in *Parents Forever* and their perception of its effectiveness for them. The information gathered from this study should prove to be helpful to individuals in the surrounding area who are experiencing divorce or separation. Information gathered from this study may also prove to be beneficial to organizations running this program. Finally, the study can provide valuable information for individuals who are looking to attend classes or programs during their times of transition. An evaluation can highlight the strengths and weaknesses of a program, as well as guide program facilitators toward making changes or improvements in the program. Evaluations can also be important tools for community members in making decisions about divorce education or intervention.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is common knowledge that divorce is a frequent result to a struggling marriage. Divorce is highly associated with impacting adults and children in negative ways, with typical difficulties ranging from anxiety and depression to financial hardship (Amato & Booth, 2000). This chapter briefly reviews impacts of divorce on children as a major social concern and also highlights research on a variety of brief intervention programs for divorcing adults and their effects.

#### **The Impacts of Divorce**

The divorce rate in the United States is significantly higher than it has been during previous periods in our nation's history. Although the divorce rate in the United States has started to plateau and drop since 1980, it is still one of the highest in the world (Goldstein, 1999). Recent statistics on divorce from the National Center for Health Statistics (2009a) indicate that the divorce rate for the United States in 2008 was at about 3.5 per 1,000 total population. In addition, according to the U.S Census Bureau, nearly ten million children under the age of 18 are living with only one of their parents due to parental divorce or separation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Considering the large numbers of children and adults who have experienced divorce in recent years, it is likely that a significant proportion of these individuals has experienced, or will experience, some negative outcomes associated with divorce.

Negative feelings such as sadness and anger are common in children of divorce (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cartwright, 2005), but the scope of negative outcomes may

reach far beyond such emotions. There are many aspects of life that seem to be affected in children as a result of parental divorce. A variety of studies have been conducted that reveal the variability and intensity of these outcomes. Areas of concern that have been studied in association with divorce are diverse and can range from low self-esteem to drug use. It has been suggested that children are most likely to undergo negative impacts as a result of the divorce process, and therefore intervention programs should target parents and help them to understand children and help them cope when divorce occurs (Lee et al., 1994).

Some researchers have contended that divorce itself is not what causes negative outcomes in children (e.g., Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). However, there is much scientific evidence that suggests divorce and divorce-related factors can impact children (Amato & Booth, 2000). Not only can this phenomenon affect children emotionally and mentally, but it can also impact their academic performance and the frequency of risk behaviors, such as the use of illicit substances. Some research has suggested that the disruptions caused by divorce can produce these negative outcomes in children. For instance, children may experience social anxiety in the event of a divorce if they perceive the divorce to be embarrassing (Schick, 2002). Other researchers believe that children can be negatively affected by factors that precede, and ultimately result in, the divorce (i.e., arguing, physical or verbal abuse) (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). Furthermore, the effects of divorce may not necessarily be short-term experiences. Some studies suggest that negative impacts which may result from experiencing divorce as a child can carry on into adulthood, potentially getting worse as the children age (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cartwright, 2005; Cherlin et al., 1998).

In essence, the literature provides substantive evidence for the association between divorce and negative outcomes for children. Evidence of mediating effects (i.e., absence of father, marital discord) and continuous effects also appear in the literature as factors that contribute to negative outcomes in children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cartwright, 2005; Cherlin et al., 1998; Pett, Wampold, Turner, & Vaughan-Cole, 1999; Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003; Schick, 2002; Sun & Li, 2002). Overall, four primary themes appear in the literature that are related to the negative outcomes in children of divorce: (1) externalized outcomes, (2) internalized outcomes, (3) continuous effects, and (4) possible causal factors.

### Externalized Outcomes

Externalizing problems are behavior problems that are directed outward, such as aggression toward others or delinquent behaviors like stealing. Several studies provide evidence of a variety of externalizing problems portrayed in children of divorce (Borkhuis & Patalano, 1997; Cherlin et al., 1998; Ham 2003; Jeynes, 2001a; Jeynes, 2001b; Jeynes, 2001c; Schick, 2002; Spigelman et al., 1991). In a study that examined 241 children between the ages of 9 and 13 of both divorced and non-divorced homes, children of divorce were more likely to have antisocial tendencies, behavior problems (including deviant behavior), and academic inconsistencies than children from non-divorced homes (Schick, 2002). Similarly, Ham (2003) found differences in academic achievement between children of divorce and children from intact families. The results from this study show that grade point averages were 11 percent higher for children from intact families, and children of divorce missed classes 60 percent more than their counterparts.

In addition to Schick (2002), other researchers have found evidence of higher aggression in children of divorce (Borkhuis & Patalano, 1997; Spigelman et al., 1991). Spigelman and colleagues (1991) administered the Rorschach Inkblot Test and Rosenzweig P-F study to 54 children from divorced families and 54 children from intact families. They used these tests to measure the levels of aggression, hostility, and anxiety in both groups of children. Both girls and boys from the sample showed an increased level of externalizing behaviors in the divorce group when compared to the non-divorced group (Spigelman et al., 1991).

Other externalizing problems that have been examined in children of divorce include alcohol consumption, drug use, and sexual behavior (Jeynes, 2001a; Jeynes, 2001b; Jeynes, 2001c). Jeynes (2001a; 2001b; 2001c) examined data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS). Data from the NELS were collected from the participants when they were in eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades. Jeynes (2001a; 2001b; 2001c) found that children who experienced their parents' divorce were more likely to consume alcohol, use cocaine and marijuana, be under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs while at school, and be more sexually permissive. These results not only applied to children whose parents recently divorced, but also to children whose parents have been divorced for more than four years. Therefore, these risk behaviors could be more likely to occur as a result of long-term effects of divorce on children.

### Internalized Outcomes

Internalizing problems refer to problems that are directed inward, affecting the individual, such as depression or anxiety. Sheets, Sandler, and West (1996) found evidence of internalizing problems in children whose parents divorced. They examined the

appraisals of these children who were between the ages of 8 and 12. They defined appraisals as “beliefs about the personal significance of events” which are closely linked to children’s perceptions (Sheets et al., 1996, p. 2166). Similar to Schick’s (2002) findings that children’s perceptions were related to their outcomes, Sheets et al. (1996) found that the children’s negative appraisals predicted psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Amato and Sobolewski (2001) also found that children of divorce tend to have higher distress, lower self-esteem, and more unhappiness. To further support this pattern, Borkhuis and Patalano (1997) examined personality differences between children of divorce and children from intact families and found depression and anxiety to be more prevalent in children of divorce. In addition, children of divorce tend to be more irritable and tense with lower levels of self-esteem and impulse control.

Although there appears to be strong evidence that divorce negatively impacts children, some researchers have found that there may be more involved than the divorce and external factors associated with the divorce (i.e., marital discord, decreased parent-child relationship quality, father involvement). In fact, the way children of divorce view their world and their experiences, as well as how they think of themselves and their changing family, can influence the negative outcomes children of divorce may or may not experience (Schick, 2002; Sheets et al., 1996).

### Continuous Effects

Negative effects of divorce that accrue for children do not necessarily end when the divorce is final. Children are likely to be affected by some of the impacts throughout the remainder of their childhood and even into adulthood. Sun and Li (2002) examined educational achievement and psychological well-being in children of divorce at four

different points in time: twice before the divorce occurred (in a one to three year time span, depending on time of divorce) and twice afterwards (in a one to three year time span). The data they collected spanned four years, and they found that divorce continued to have negative effects on some children through the fourth time of examination (Sun & Li). Some other studies also suggest that divorce experienced in childhood can affect some individuals into their years of adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cartwright, 2005; Cherlin et al., 1998). For example, Cartwright asked young adults who experienced divorce as children to explain how the divorce affected them and how they thought it might affect them in the future. While some of the participants viewed the divorce of their parents as beneficial, well over half of the participants linked their parents' divorce to problems in self-esteem, communication, trust in others, jealousy, suspicion, being overly emotional, and experiencing difficulties or worries about having problems in romantic relationships or marriages. Slightly less than half of those responding also reported having family problems.

Other researchers have found results suggesting that there seems to be a persistent “gap in well-being between offspring with divorced parents and offspring with continuously married parents” (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001, p. 917). This pattern indicates that some children who experienced parental divorce carry difficulties into adulthood that puts them at higher risk for continuous negative impacts compared to the adults who came from intact families. In addition, Cherlin and colleagues (1998) discovered that some adults who experienced divorce as children experience a continuous increase in emotional problems as the years go on. Whatever the source of such difficulties, it seems logical to



encourage interventions designed to help parents in minimizing negative effects and understanding the difficulties that children can experience as a result of parental divorce.

### Possible Causal Factors

There are a number of factors which contribute to the negative outcomes that children of divorce may experience. As researchers and professionals understand what specific factors cause distress and emotional suffering in children, the easier it will become to help families in dealing with the effects of divorce. Parental influences have been identified as one factor that makes a contribution to how children experience divorce.

According to Pett and colleagues (1999), divorce serves more as an indirect influence on children rather than a direct influence. They propose that divorce affects things such as the family socioeconomic status, the quality of the family relationship, and maternal strain. These factors, in turn, can then directly impact the children involved. In addition, a study examining the differences between children from divorced families and children from intact families suggests that reduced social support from their fathers may be why children from divorced families show more negative outcomes than children whose parents are still married (Schick, 2002). Schick (2002) further observed that the differences between children of divorce and children from intact families may be due to how the children perceived the destructiveness of their parents' conflicts. In other words, children who perceived their parents' conflicts to be highly destructive (perhaps as opposed to being normal or "not a big deal") had more negative outcomes than children who did not share this perception (Schick, 2002). Similarly, Pruett and colleagues (2003) found that children who had more involved fathers were better at communicating, socializing, and performing tasks of daily living. They also found that parental conflict tended to predict less father

involvement. Children who experienced more parental conflict were less skilled than other children were in areas such as communication and socializing.

While decreased father involvement may contribute to negative outcomes for children, certain characteristics of mothers may contribute as well. In a study of 99 groups of non-divorced mothers and their children and 99 groups of divorced mothers and their children, the divorced mothers were found to be more “overburdened, stressed, depressed, and hassled” (Pett et al., 1999, p. 161), which can put a strain on the mother-child relationship and lead to neglectful parenting behaviors. In other words, mothers who are in the midst of a divorce may be busy and overwhelmed from coping with the new changes, thus not providing their children with as much attention as they have in the past. This decline in attention has the potential to negatively impact the children as well as the relationship they have with their mothers (Pett et al., 1999).

Amato and Sobolewski (2001) discovered evidence of decreased relational quality between parents and children of divorce. They examined data from a longitudinal study that focused on marital instability and found that marital problems appear to weaken emotional bonds that parents have with their children. They believe that this, in turn, leads to a decline in the children’s psychological well-being. In addition, the data suggest that the psychological well-being of children of divorce has a tendency to continuously decline after each family transition. Therefore, children whose parents have divorced and remarried are likely to be more psychologically distressed than children whose parents have solely divorced (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

While it is possible for children to be negatively affected during and after the divorce, it is also possible for children to be negatively impacted before the divorce even

occurs (Cherlin et al., 1991; Cherlin et al., 1998). Cherlin et al. (1998) refer to this phenomenon as “predisruption effects” because the negative outcomes that these children undergo are initiated by parental conflict that occurs before the parents get a divorce.

Based on the studies mentioned above, there appear to be a number of factors that contribute to the negative outcomes in children of divorce. Both parents may negatively influence their children by not providing support or not being present in their children’s lives (Pett et al., 1999; Pruett et al., 2003; Schick, 2002). Also, marital discord before, during, and after the divorce can potentially have a negative impact upon children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cherlin et al., 1991; Cherlin et al., 1998; Pruett et al., 2003; Schick, 2002). There are a variety of negative outcomes that seem to be associated with these factors. In general, studies have found that these factors can produce both externalizing and internalizing problems in children of divorce.

### **Divorce Education Programs**

Because divorce can be difficult for adults and harmful to children, many divorce education programs have been developed to inform parents about these harmful effects. These programs can also give parents advice on how to prevent or mitigate the harmful effects and help their children, as well as themselves, cope with the transition. The studies that evaluate these programs have generally reported positive benefits of such programs in their results (Fischer, 1999; Gilman et al., 2005; Hughes & Kirby, 2000; Lee et al., 1994; Pedro-Carroll et al., 1999). As identified in the literature, divorce can impact children and adults in a variety of ways. The considerable consequences that may occur from separation or divorce brings attention to the importance of assistance from outside sources. Whether it be family counseling, individual therapy, or parent and child educational programs, some

research findings have provided solid evidence that interventions have the ability to lessen the negative effects of divorce and assist parents and their children through the transition (Criddle, Jr., Allgood, & Piercy, 2003; Kurkowski, Gordon, & Arbuthnot, 1993; McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Stone, Clark, & McKenry, 2000; Zibbell, 1992).

The particular act of divorce or separation may not be the sole contributor to negative outcomes. Children and adults may be affected by related conditions such as ongoing parental conflict, diminished father involvement, economic challenges, and other factors (Amato & Booth, 2000). Therefore, interventions and educational programs which target these conditions and seek to facilitate improvement can be a beneficial resource for divorcing families. In these programs, parents can learn to cope with their feelings, communicate with their former spouse and children, and learn about specific things they can do to help their children through the transition (Lee et al., 1994). Divorce education programs for parents can be an important step in mitigating some of the negative effects of divorce on children.

A variety of educational programs exist for divorcing or separating parents. Most of these programs focus on informing parents how they can make the divorce or separation process easier on their children (i.e., by making sure the children are not in the middle of parental conflict, increasing parent knowledge about child development, informing parents how divorce can affect children, etc.). Other topics covered in these programs include improving communication between the two parents, reducing conflict between the two parents, and the importance of having both parents involved in the children's lives. In addition, the programs reviewed below employ a variety of methods that include

discussion, activities, pre and posttests, and parent and child interaction. Further research in this area can serve to highlight the value of specific programs, improve their quality and success, and provide greater benefits for the parents who participate in them and for their children.

As discussed above, different divorce education programs for parents may offer common content to their participants. Other similar aspects of such programs include providing social support, teaching coping skills, and providing specific educational resources for parents. Most divorce education programs are psychoeducational interventions that focus on individual learning, group support, and educational resources (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996). Programs usually operate through an educational system (e.g., extension service), social services agency, or court system. Typically, programs vary in length from 4 hours to 24 hours and may include anywhere from one to 10 educational sessions. In some states, divorce education is mandated under state law while in other areas it is strongly encouraged through partnerships between social service organizations and court systems (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004; Hughes & Kirby, 2000).

Research on the effects of divorce education began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Lee et al., 1994; Whitworth et al., 2002). These studies focused on educational interventions for parents undergoing divorce and covered variables such as post-divorce adjustment, self-esteem, depression, relationships with the former spouse, and general psychological well-being (Lee et al., 1994). The results from these early studies regarding the effects of divorce education have been mixed. Some of these early studies indicated no difference between divorcing individuals in treatment and control groups on variables such as self-esteem, relationship with the ex-spouse, and social support (Bloom, Hodges, &

Caldwell, 1982; Salts & Zongker, 1983; Woody, Colley, Schlegelmilch, & Maginn, 1985). Conversely, other studies discovered significant improvements occurring for individuals who participated in divorce education on such variables as overall distress, anxiety, depression, and post-divorce adjustment (Bloom et al., 1982; Thiessen, Avery, & Joanning, 1980). Sprenkle and Storm (1983) conducted and published the first empirical review of research on the effects of divorce education for adults, concluding that some evidence indicates that these programs help individuals gain a sense of confidence and mastery. A representative group of studies regarding the effectiveness of divorce education programs for adults are reviewed below in order to establish the general findings from this body of research.

Zibbell (1992) assessed a four-week small-group educational program for separated and divorcing parents. The focus of the intervention was on children's needs, communication and negotiation, and group support during the divorce process. Parents indicated statistically significant improvements in their attitudes about cooperation and communication, as well as some progress in changing adversarial behaviors in the short term. Significant changes in the participant attitudes and attempts at changing their behaviors for the better suggest that this program had some beneficial effects. However, the outcomes measured were only examined on a short-term basis so it is uncertain how the program affected parents over a longer period of time.

Kurkowski et al. (1993) approached an educational intervention differently. Rather than having parents attend a program where they learn about the effects of divorce on their children and their own attitudes and behaviors, these divorcing parents were sent materials in the mail that described how parents may be putting their children in the middle of

parental conflict and encouraged the parents to take the time to improve on these behaviors. To measure the effectiveness of this procedure, the parents' high school-aged children were administered questionnaires that asked how often their parents engaged in behaviors that put them in the middle of parental conflict or interaction both before and after the parents received the material. The results of this research suggest that this particular intervention strategy was beneficial towards helping parents reduce the behaviors that involve their children in conflict. In addition, the intervention appeared to improve communication between parents and their children about the targeted behaviors.

Another divorce education program focused on the needs of children of divorce and the stress they may feel from being put in the middle of parental conflict (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996). Parents were mandated by the court system to attend this two-hour course upon filing for divorce or legal separation. To measure the effectiveness of the program, parents were given a questionnaire upon completion of the session that assessed satisfaction of the program, problem-solving situations, and perceptions of their children's coping abilities. Six months after completing the course, participants were contacted for a phone interview. The results from this evaluation support the goals for the program in that parents became more aware of their own lack of knowledge about their children's struggles related to the divorce. In addition, they seemed to acquire new problem-solving skills from the program and reduce their behaviors that put their children in the middle of conflict.

The *Kids in Divorce and Separation (KIDS)* program is a four-hour, two session program that focused on preventing conflict and easing the transition for parents and their children. An evaluation of this program used two groups of participants; one group of parents attended the *KIDS* program and another attended a general parenting course. A

pretest, posttest, and follow-up evaluation were used to assess program effectiveness. The pretest included a shortened version of the Parents' Knowledge about Conflict/Divorce Issues test, the O'Leary/Porter Scale (OPS), which measures the frequency and content of parental conflict, and the Parents' Behavior Checklist. For the posttest, participants completed the full version of the Parents' Knowledge about Conflict/Divorce Issues test as well as a questionnaire addressing satisfaction of the program. The posttest also included the OPS and Parents' Behavior Checklist. Finally, for the follow-up evaluation, which was conducted one month after the participants completed the program, participants were given the OPS and Parent's Behavior Checklist again. Analyses of the data indicated that there were significant differences between the experimental and control groups, and parents who participated in the program appeared to gain knowledge about conflict/divorce issues. In addition, these parents reported fewer conflicts after participating in the program. Analyses of follow-up data were also significant, suggesting that the effects of participating in the *KIDS* program are maintained one month following the program (Shifflett & Cummings, 1999).

Another example of educational interventions for divorcing parents is called the PEACE program (Parents' Education about Children's Emotions) (McKenry et al., 1999; Stone et al., 2000). Participants were mandated to attend this single, two-and-a-half hour session within 30 days of filing for divorce. This program enlightened participants on the impacts of divorce on children and how divorce, as well as parental behavior, can influence children's adjustment to the family transition. One evaluative study of this program utilized quantitative methods to measure the effects of the program on post-divorce adjustment, co-parental relationships, and parent-child relationships (McKenry et al.). In this study,



program participants were compared to a group of other parents who were experiencing divorce but had not attended the program. Participants perceived the PEACE program to be very beneficial. In addition, some statistically significant findings indicated that the participants who attended PEACE reported better relationships with their children following the program than those participants who did not attend. However, the evaluation did not find differences between the two groups on co-parental relationship quality and conflict, adjustment to custody and visitation arrangements, and knowledge about children following the divorce.

Another evaluation of the PEACE program applied qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods (Stone et al., 2000). Program participants were interviewed about program satisfaction and knowledge. Overall, the parents considered the program to be successful in raising their awareness of the impacts that divorce can have on children. Also, the participants found role play activities and informative handbooks to be the most helpful aspects of the program. Some behavior changes were also reported, such as a decrease in discussion of the other parent's faults and using the child as a messenger.

The *Focus on Kids* program is a two-and-a-half hour session that is administered to divorcing or never married parents. The evaluation of this program used a single questionnaire that was given to the participants upon completion of the program. This questionnaire focused on demographics, general impressions of the program, perceived impacts of the program, and information on couple and parent-child relationships (Feng & Fine, 2000). This particular evaluation investigated whether participant outcomes varied by characteristics such as age, race, gender, length of marriage, education level, and other such variables. No differences were found on most of the identified variables, with the exception

that older participants and participants married the longest found the program less helpful than participants who were younger or had not been married that long. Also, results from this evaluation found that participants had a high level of satisfaction with the program. Although this study did not examine how the program may have helped parents, it is still of value in that this study suggests such divorce education programs generally “[fit] the needs of participants from varying socioeconomic and divorce-related backgrounds” (Feng & Fine, p. 16).

An evaluation of a court mandated program in Utah assessed whether the program met its goals of reducing conflict and decreasing the number of custody-related legal issues for divorcing parents. Telephone interviews were given to a group of program participants and a control group of parents who were experiencing a divorce but had not attended the program. Questions asked during the interview focused on autonomy and intimacy issues, child support and custody issues, and legal issues. Comparisons of the variables found that the program may have been beneficial in reducing conflict, as the control group had significantly higher conflict scores than the program participants. Furthermore, when program participation and the number of children parents have were looked at, a decrease in relitigation was found for parents with fewer children. Therefore, those parents with a lower number of children who participated in the program were less likely to go back to court than parents who had a higher number of children and also participated in the program (Criddle, Jr. et al., 2003).

Divorce education programs are offered to and utilized by parents in other countries as well. *Parent Education Programs* is an educational intervention administered through the family courts in Israel. It consisted of four sessions that lasted three hours each. The

program focused on giving parents information about the effects of divorce on children, becoming aware of their children's reactions to divorce and their needs, helping children to adjust, and how to communicate effectively and cooperate with their former spouse (Laufer & Berman, 2006). The study investigators used a posttest to evaluate program satisfaction among 130 participants over a two-month period. The results suggest that the participants viewed the goals of the program as being met in areas such as support from group members and gaining knowledge on how divorce affects children. Further, program participants identified group support as the most beneficial element of the program. Eighty-nine percent of participants also indicated strong satisfaction with the program. The study authors suggest that the program appeared beneficial to parents because it helped them to cope with the divorce, interact with others undergoing the same situation, receive emotional support, and increase self-understanding in the process.

Another recent study assessed the *Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting* program among participants in a southern state. This program is a four-hour program that includes an educational curriculum, the *Children in the Middle* educational video, and other materials. Participants in this study were mandated to attend the course, which was created to inform parents of the impact that divorce, separation, and conflict can have on children and provide advice about what they can do to help their children manage the transition. The purpose of this evaluation was to assess any changes parents have in their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors after completing the program and to measure program satisfaction. To assess these variables, a pretest, posttest, and follow-up questionnaire were provided to the participants. The pretest asked participants to report their frequency of certain behaviors in the past two weeks, as well as how well they cooperate with their former spouse. The

posttest was administered to the participants immediately following the program, and it measured participant satisfaction. Three to nine months after completing the program, participants were sent follow-up surveys. These surveys asked, once again, how often in the past two weeks participants engaged in specific behaviors and how well they get along with their former spouse. Overall, the participants were very satisfied with the program. Additionally, parents reported a significant decrease in all measured behaviors, with the exception of one, one month after completion of the program (Brandon, 2006).

The *Parents Forever* program has been evaluated once prior to the current research. This pilot evaluation was completed by the University of Minnesota. Dworkin and Karahan (2005) contacted participants four to 13 months after their participation in the program. Telephone interviews were used to collect responses from the participants on the usefulness of the program. The participants reported having a greater ability to communicate with and understand their children since participation. They also reported that they were more able to keep their children out of the middle of conflict (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005).

Reviewing a representative sample of evaluation research on divorce education programs for parents reveals many differences in methods of evaluation for these programs. In addition, the programs reviewed varied greatly in their level of reported success. Furthermore, the content of the programs and specific outcomes measured have changed throughout the years. More recent programs tend to focus on educating parents about the impacts that divorce has on children and how to reduce conflict between them and their former spouse. However, parent education programs used to be more parent-focused, centering on variables such as self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Lee et al., 1994). When Whitworth and colleagues (2002) conducted their review, they could not provide certainty

in the effectiveness or value of divorce education programs. After reviewing the selected program evaluations, certainty in overall program effectiveness can still not be provided, as long term effects are unknown. To understand if these educational programs are effective in helping parents and children with the divorce process, longitudinal evaluations could be implemented. With different methods of evaluation and variables studied, a general statement of the value of divorce interventions for parents cannot be made.

Because educational interventions for parents seem to vary in their level of success, it is important to continue evaluating these programs. With continuous evaluation, researchers and program directors can decide what is beneficial and refine their programs to meet the needs of divorcing parents and their children. The current study seeks to do just that by providing evidence of the effectiveness and value the participants place on the program and if the program has a sustained impact on the lives of these parents.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

A largely quantitative approach was used to evaluate the *Parents Forever: Education for Families in Divorce Transition* program. The intent of the program was to facilitate awareness of issues faced by children when parents divorce or separate and to provide parents with skills to work together in parenting and help their children cope with the divorce process. This particular program was developed by the University of Minnesota. In North Dakota, the program is administered regionally through the NDSU Extension Service and is regularly delivered in four-hour educational sessions to divorcing parents. A variety of previous research studies have looked at the effects of brief divorce education programs, but assessment of the *Parents Forever* program was very limited. This study allowed further evaluation of the program using a brief longitudinal approach that surveyed participants twice following their participation. The methods used to administer the program evaluation, gather data from program participants, and generate findings that reflect the effects of the program are detailed below.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 108 female and 98 male parents, step-parents or caregivers who were involved in a divorce or separation at the time of the study. Five participants did not disclose their gender. There were a total of 211 participants from program sites in seven counties in North Dakota. Participants were offered the opportunity to complete the study questionnaires and thus participated on a voluntary basis. Of the 211 participants who filled out the post program survey, 55 of them filled out the follow-up

questionnaire giving a response rate of 26 percent. The composition of the original 211 participants and the 55 who completed the follow-up questionnaire were similar in terms of which county they were from. For both time periods, the majority of the participants took the class in Cass County and the least number of participants came from Ramsey County. Conversely, the post program and follow-up groups are not similar in regards to gender. The post program group was well balanced with 46.4 percent male participants and 51.2 percent female participants. Of those who completed the follow-up questionnaire, 70.9 percent were women and 29.1 percent were men.

Table 1 illustrates the relationship status of the participants at both the initial questionnaire and the follow-up questionnaire time periods. For both time periods, the majority of participants reported being in or having completed the divorce process at the time they responded to the questionnaire. Data were collected from participants in seven counties in North Dakota.

Table 1  
*Frequencies for Relationship Status*

	<u>Post-Survey</u>		<u>Follow-Up</u>	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Considering separation or divorce	6	3.0	0	0.0
Separated from partner	6	3.0	2	3.9
In the divorce process	83	41.9	17	33.3
Completed the divorce process	64	32.3	27	52.9
Never married to child's other parent	30	15.2	5	9.8
Does not apply	9	4.5	0	0.0

## Study Questionnaires

For this study, two questionnaires were developed to assess the objectives of the *Parents Forever* program. The first questionnaire is a retrospective posttest which asked participants to report on the present time and their perceptions of the program experience. Participants had the opportunity to complete this questionnaire at the end of their program session. The second questionnaire is a follow-up instrument which was given to participants six to eight weeks following their involvement in the program. The surveys that the participants were asked to fill out are complementary. Questions on the instruments relate to participant characteristics, perceptions of program value, knowledge of program content, and effects on behavior and relationships.

Information concerning the validity and reliability of these instruments is not currently available because they are newly developed questionnaires that have not been subjected to such tests. However, based upon feedback during the review process the questions on both instruments appear to have face validity.

### The Post Program Questionnaire

The initial post program questionnaire consists of 27 items that include multiple response options, Likert scales, and open-ended qualitative questions. A copy of this questionnaire appears in Appendix A.

Research question one (How do participants in *Parents Forever* perceive the value of the program?) was addressed by the first two major questions (e.g., “I felt the *Parents Forever* session was worthwhile for me” and “I think the *Parents Forever* class would be beneficial for other divorcing parents”). The answers to these questions were reported on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). This research



question was also answered by questions 11-16 which asked the participants how they perceived the workshop (e.g., “The workshop instructors provided information that will help me”) and whether they would recommend the program to someone else. The workshop questions were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (5), and the recommendation question was answered dichotomously as “yes” or “no.” The last three qualitative questions also addressed the first research question. These questions asked the participants to list the most helpful aspects of the program, any topics or issues they would like more information about, and any ideas they feel would improve the program.

Research question two (What effects does participation in *Parents Forever* have on participants’ perceived knowledge regarding divorce and its effects on children?) was addressed in the post program questionnaire by questions four through ten, which asked participants to rate their understanding of program concepts (i.e., “My understanding of patterns to avoid that might hurt children and what I can do to help them cope with the divorce process”) on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “low” (1) to “high” (5). Participants were asked to rank these items retrospectively; once for how knowledgeable they were on the topics prior to participation, and again for how knowledgeable they were at that time after participation (Marshall, Higginbotham, Harris, & Lee, 2007). Additionally, the qualitative question that asked participants to list any topics or issues they would like more information about may also answer this research question.

Research question four (What are some of the issues affecting participation in the *Parents Forever* program?) was addressed by questions 17-21 in the post program survey. Questions 17-20 are multiple-option questions that asked how the participants learned of

the program, how they felt about attending the class, and if they had any barriers in attending the class. Question 21 is an open-ended question that asked the participants to list their primary intent in attending the program.

### The Follow-Up Questionnaire

The follow-up questionnaire consists of 28 items that are multiple option, Likert scale, and open-ended questions (see Appendix B). In this questionnaire, research question one was addressed by the first two major questions, which are the same as in the post program survey. Also, questions 19-23 and 26-28 addressed this research question. Questions 19-23 asked participants to rate the value of the workshop (e.g., “The workshop materials [handouts, etc.] have been useful to me.”) on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (5). Question 26 asked the participants to rate how useful a number of sources of information (i.e., friends, relatives, attorney) have been for them during the divorce or separation process. This was answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all useful” (1) to “very useful”(5). Questions 27 and 28 are open-ended questions that asked participants what information, skills or resources from the workshop have been most useful and if participation in the workshop has led them to do anything differently during the transition.

Research question two was answered by questions 14 and 15 in the follow-up questionnaire. These questions asked participants about their perceived knowledge gain from participation in the program (e.g., “Overall, how much did this program increase your understanding of children and divorce?”). The answers to these questions were given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (5).

Research question three (What impacts does participation in the *Parents Forever* program have on participants' relationships, behavior, and perceived knowledge following the program?) was addressed in the follow-up questionnaire by questions 4-18 and 28. Questions 4-13 asked participants to rate the frequency of certain behaviors for the present time and three months prior to participation in the program (e.g., "How often do you encourage your child(ren) to spend time with his or her other parent"). These questions were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (1) to "very often" (5). Questions 14-18 asked participants to rate the influence of the program on their perceived knowledge, relationships, and behavior on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5).

#### Designing Assessment Measures

Since limited research had been done on the *Parents Forever* program, it was necessary to design questionnaires that could be used in assessing the program and its effects. A brief retrospective post program survey was administered to participants at the conclusion of the program. Additionally, a follow-up questionnaire was administered approximately six to eight weeks following their participation. The post program questionnaire was designed by examining evaluation tools within the program itself, developing questions that matched program objectives, and adding questions related to program quality and participant characteristics. This questionnaire also went through a pilot testing process by the NDSU Extension Service and was revised according to significant feedback from university and Extension professionals. The follow-up questionnaire was designed by developing behavior-based questions to complement the knowledge-based questions on the post program questionnaire to assess any correlations between behaviors

and knowledge gained in the program. This questionnaire has also gone through a process of review by university and extension professionals, and its final version was based on such feedback. The post program and follow-up questionnaires were coded in order to match the participants' questionnaires from each time period.

### **Procedures**

Arrangements to conduct the evaluation of the *Parents Forever* program were facilitated through discussion with specialists and directors within the NDSU Extension Service. Since the program was already delivered on a regular basis throughout the state of North Dakota, the seven sites with the largest volume of participants were selected to administer the assessment process for a period of ten months. These sites included Fargo, Jamestown, Bismarck, Dickinson, Minot, Devils Lake, and Grand Forks. IRB approval for this study was obtained through North Dakota State University.

As divorcing parents in North Dakota are not mandated by law to attend an educational intervention, the participants in *Parents Forever* mainly attended the program session through recommendation or suggestion from others (e.g., from their attorney). The parents who attended the program had the opportunity to complete two questionnaires regarding their satisfaction with the program, what they have learned, and any possible impacts on their behavior. At the conclusion of each four-hour session, the program facilitators distributed the first retrospective questionnaire and asked the attendees to participate and answer the questions to the best of their ability. If the participants were willing to continue in the study and provide their mailing address or contact information on the informed consent cover sheet (see Appendix C), they were sent the follow-up questionnaire through mail, email, or telephone approximately six to eight weeks after

completing the program. If participants were contacted through postal mail, they were given the survey along with a self-addressed, postage paid envelope in which to return the completed survey. If they preferred email, they were sent an email that contained a link to an online survey site where they could complete and submit the questionnaire. Participants contacted by telephone were called by one of the researchers and asked each of the questions on the follow-up questionnaire. If participants did not respond during the first attempt, they were contacted two to three more times to remind them of the follow-up questionnaire. Although 132 of the participants agreed to participate in the follow-up questionnaire, only 55 participants actually completed it. Gathering data several weeks after course completion provided information about the short-term effects of the program.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were generated from the answers provided on each questionnaire to determine means, standard deviations, and frequencies. These statistics were utilized to help answer research questions one and four regarding how participants in the *Parents Forever* program perceive its value and what issues seem to affect participation in the program.

A series of paired-sample *t* test comparisons were administered for retrospective questions that asked participants about their knowledge and behavior both prior to and following the program. Mean scores provided for before and after participation in the program were compared to assess any perceived change between the two time periods. These statistical procedures were used to answer research questions two and three (i.e., “What effects does participation in the *Parents Forever* program have on participant knowledge regarding divorce and its effects on children?” and “What impacts does

participation in the *Parents Forever* program have on participant knowledge, relationships, and behavior following the program?”).

A thematic qualitative analysis of participant responses to open-ended questions on both questionnaires was also conducted. This was done by analyzing each participant response and grouping the responses into themes. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) This analysis process provided further insight into how participants perceived the program and the issues that they highlighted regarding their experience. Further, participants’ open-ended responses furnished specific feedback related to program effectiveness and performance.

### **Ethical Guidelines**

In order to comply with university procedures regarding ethical guidelines in research, a brief informed consent letter regarding the study was distributed with the first questionnaire to all program participants (see Appendix D). The letter included information on informed consent and the rights of human subjects in research. The project was approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of North Dakota State University. Those individuals who consented to participate did so simply by filling out the questionnaire and returning it to study personnel.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The four research questions that guided this study were explored using descriptive statistics, frequencies, and *t* tests, as well as qualitative thematic analysis. The results of the analyses used to investigate each of the research questions are outlined below.

#### **Adult Participants' Perceived Value of the *Parents Forever* Program**

The first research question pertained to how participants perceived the value of the program. Means and standard deviations were utilized to determine how participants perceived the program based on several criteria. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the questions pertaining to their perceived value from the post program and follow-up questionnaires. The questions in Table 2 were scored on a five-point Likert scale. For the first two questions, one represents "strongly disagree" and five represents "strongly agree." For the remaining questions, one represents "not at all" and five represents "very much."

The mean scores for the first two value questions on both the post program and follow-up questionnaires are all around a four or higher (agree), and the mean scores for the post program questionnaire are slightly higher than the means for the follow-up questionnaire. Both immediately following the program and several weeks later, participants largely agreed that the program was worthwhile for them and that it would be beneficial for other divorcing parents. Eighty-three percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed the program was worthwhile to them immediately following the session, and 82 percent similarly agreed if they responded to the follow-up survey weeks later.

Further, 92 percent indicated they felt the class would be beneficial for other divorcing parents (in the follow-up survey this number was 89 percent).

Table 2  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Value of the Parents Forever Program*

	Post-Test		Follow-Up	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Felt the Parents Forever Session was worthwhile	4.11	0.82	3.96	0.94
Thinks the Parents Forever class would be beneficial for other divorcing parents	4.38	0.73	4.27	0.99
Workshop instructors were well prepared	4.49	0.70	--	--
Workshop instructors presented material well	4.55	0.72	--	--
Workshop instructors provided information that will help me	4.53	0.73	--	--
Handouts/handbook provided will be helpful to me	4.50	0.77	--	--
Video clips were helpful to me	3.85	1.26	--	--
Workshop materials were useful	--	--	3.22	1.05
Workshop helped parents to be more attentive to children's needs in the divorce process	--	--	3.60	0.95
Workshop helped parents assist children in coping process	--	--	3.39	1.08
Workshop helped manage difficulties in the divorce process more effectively	--	--	3.37	1.06
Workshop helped parents work more effectively in coparenting with child's other parent	--	--	2.82	1.13



The means for the five workshop quality questions in Table 2 that immediately followed the session ranged from  $M = 3.85$  (“video clips were helpful”) to  $M = 4.55$  (“workshop instructors presented material well”). These were consistently positive responses. The next set of five questions emerged from the follow-up survey and pertained to how the program helped parents to assist their children in the coping process and work through divorce difficulties. The responses ranged from  $M = 2.82$  (workshop helped parents work more effectively in co-parenting with the child’s other parent) to  $M = 3.60$  (workshop helped parents be more attentive to child needs in the divorce process). The moderately strong responses to the follow-up survey indicate that parents perceived some positive benefit from the workshop in their efforts to manage difficulties and assist children in the weeks following the program.

In addition to questions about the value of the workshop, participants rated the usefulness of several sources of information during the divorce or separation process. The information sources were rated on a five-point Likert scale with one representing “not at all useful” and five representing “very useful.” The means and standard deviations associated with each information source can be found in Table 3.

According to the results, the participants rated attorneys as the most useful information source during the divorce process ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). This was followed closely by parents, friends, and the *Parents Forever* program. Participants generally rated the *Parents Forever* program as “somewhat useful” to “useful” ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). Although the *Parents Forever* program was ranked as the fourth most useful source of information, a one-sample  $t$  test indicated that there is not a significant difference among the mean score of the *Parents Forever* program and the mean scores of the other top

ranking information sources ( $p = .649$ ). These results suggest that participants found the program to be just as useful as attorneys, parents and friends during the divorce process. Participants considered the least useful information source to be the child's other parent ( $M = 1.76, SD = 1.25$ ).

Table 3  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Usefulness of Information Sources*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parents	3.81	1.36
Child's other parent	1.76	1.25
Relatives or in-laws	3.02	1.39
Friends	3.78	1.28
Attorneys	3.85	1.37
Judge/court system	3.07	1.47
Divorced friends	3.55	1.31
Counselors/social workers	3.66	1.44
Books, magazines, newspapers	2.70	1.37
Internet	2.86	1.27
<i>Parents Forever</i> class	3.77	1.12

To gain further understanding into how the participants perceived the value of the *Parents Forever* program, participants were asked in the initial post program questionnaire if they would recommend the program to someone else. Of those who responded to the question, 97.4 percent ( $N = 191$ ) reported that they would in fact recommend the *Parents Forever* program to someone else while only five participants said they would not. Fifteen participants did not answer this question. This high level of program endorsement by

participants represents another indicator of how individuals perceived the value of the program.

### Identified Benefits of the Program

One of the open-ended questions that participants responded to on the post program questionnaire allowed them to identify beneficial aspects of the workshop in which they participated. One hundred and six participants (50.2 percent) responded to this question and recorded their perceptions of helpful aspects of the program. Qualitative analysis of the primary themes among participant responses indicated five common themes. These themes were: (1) increased knowledge of the divorce process and parenting issues; (2) improved understanding of children's feelings and experiences in the divorce process; (3) enhanced communication skills in relating to the other parent and children; (4) usefulness of program materials; and (5) value of discussion and social support regarding divorce issues.

Increased knowledge of divorce process and parenting issues. The most common theme that emerged in participant comments was that the program facilitated an increase in their knowledge concerning parenting issues and working with their children in the divorce process. Thirty-four participants (32 percent of those who responded to the question) shared comments which emphasized this benefit of the program. Four key sub-themes associated with this area were apparent in the analysis of participant comments.

First, parents indicated an increased awareness of behaviors to avoid that can be harmful to children in the divorce process. For example, one parent noted learning "not to put the children in the middle" and another highlighted learning "things you say that negatively impact the children's self-worth." One parent observed, "I learned to see that some of the things I was doing weren't beneficial to my son." Second, parents also

commented on increased awareness of behaviors that could improve family interactions with their former spouse and/or their children. These comments focused around such items as putting children first and how to positively deal with interactions involving family members. Third, participants specifically identified the concept of parallel parenting and parenting plans as useful to them. One participant commented, "I really thought the section on parenting plans was very good," while another appreciated learning of "ways to get a parallel parenting plan." Fourth, participants valued the increased awareness provided on a variety of parenting issues ranging from parenting styles to how to discipline children effectively.

Improved understanding of children's feelings and experiences in the divorce process. Another common theme identified from participants' responses is their improved understanding of children's feelings and experiences in the divorce process. Thirty-two of the participants (30.2 percent of those responding) indicated that the program benefitted them in this area. Three sub-themes were identified under this topic.

The most prominent pattern associated with this theme was participants' increased understanding of the process children go through during divorce and how to help them adjust. One step-parent noted the value of "understanding what my step-son is going through and how to help him." Another parent stated, "[I] know that what the children are going through is normal and I can better help them now." The next sub-theme that emerged was parents' appreciation for gaining a better understanding of the stages of grief that children experience during divorce. The third associated theme on this topic was increased familiarity with the developmental stages of children and how that affects child responses in the coping process.

Enhanced communication skills in relating to the other parent and children. The third major theme emphasized by participants was that they had learned additional communication skills to employ in relating to the other parent and to their children. Twenty parents (about 1 in 5 responding) highlighted the value of learning skills for better communication in the divorce process. The major emphasis in this area was communication skills while a few also mentioned skills for coping with conflict situations. For example, participants indicated value in learning about “the communication aspect of divorce” or “communication steps both with the child and the child’s mother.” One specific aspect of communication taught in the program that some participants identified as helpful was the usage of “I” messages. As an example, one participant noted “I found the part on using ‘I’ messages very helpful.”

Usefulness of program materials. A small group of participants commented that the program materials they were exposed to or received during participation were helpful to them. Specifically, the program booklet and related handouts were identified as useful, as well as the video clips displayed during the class session. One participant observed, “The videos and book really helped, as well as the knowledge of the instructor.” Some participants highlighted very specific aspects of the program materials, such as the “video on the games parents play” or “the section on parenting plans [in the book].”

Value of discussion and social support regarding divorce issues. A final theme that emerged regarding beneficial aspects of the program centered on the value of discussing divorce issues with others and gaining social support through group discussion. Participants perceived value in talking about issues, listening to others’ stories, and connecting to others

in similar situations. One person explained, “Being able to listen to the other parents there helped a lot – just hearing their situations and how they were dealing with their problems.”

#### Additional Information Desired by Participants

By means of an open-ended question, participants were asked in the post-program questionnaire if there were any topics or issues that they would like additional information about. This question also provides help in answering the research question on how participants perceived the value of the program and what was offered. Forty-six participants (21.8 percent) responded to this question. In this group of participants, the most common answer to the question was “none” or “n/a” in which 36.9 percent gave this response. Of the remaining responses, three common themes were identified through qualitative analysis: (1) getting along with former partner; (2) handling divorce-related issues with their children; and (3) managing children’s behavior.

Getting along with former partner. The second most common response from participants dealt with getting along with their former partner. Nine (19.6 percent) of the responding participants reported wanting additional information on this topic. Three sub-themes were associated with this topic.

First, participants commented on wanting more information about communicating with their former partner. For example, one participant stated, “[I] wish they would focus more on communication with the other parent.” Second, some participants indicated that more information on co-parenting and parenting plans would be useful: “the parenting plan information was very good, but I believe it would be beneficial to receive more information on the subject.” Finally, some of the participants also believed information on how to deal with an abusive partner/parent would be beneficial. One participant wanted more

information on “how to handle parenting when the other parent is a safety issue for the child.”

Handling divorce-related issues with their children. A small group of participants also expressed that they would like more information on how to handle divorce-related issues with their children. This included information on supervised visitations and putting children in the middle. A participant stated wanting to know more about “dealing with the effects of divorce on [her] children.”

Managing children’s behavior. Some participants also reported wanting more information about dealing with their children’s behavior. Some specific issues mentioned were anger, rebellion, and discipline. For example, one parent stated, “I would have liked more ‘situational’ examples of behaviors of children and how to respond to them.” Another parent wondered about “how much should we actually deal with our child and will it affect the way they act in the future.” In such situations, it is common to refer parents who might wish to know about more generic parenting concerns to other available parenting classes.

#### Participant Ideas to Improve Program

Another open-ended question highlighting participant responses to the program stated, “Please list any ideas you feel would improve this program.” Participant responses to this item were quite varied. Fifty-four (25.6 percent) participants responded to this question. Of the 54 participants, 18 of them (33.3 percent) responded by writing either “none” or referring to the class as being good and not needing improvements. The remaining percentage gave a variety of answers. However, through qualitative analysis, four small themes were identified among the variety of responses. These themes are: (1)

Length of class; (2) Diversify program to include 'separation'; (3) Improve/change videos; and (4) Presenter preparation.

Length of class. A small group of participants commented on the length of the class. Five participants mentioned this topic, stating that the program should be "done in a couple 2-hour sessions" or that the class "could be shortened." While most in this group would prefer the class to be shorter, one participant suggested to "extend [the] workshop to cover more details."

Diversify program to include 'separation'. Another small group of four participants commented on gearing the program more towards never-married parents who are separating, as well as divorcing parents. One participant suggested the program "talk more about relationships that were not living in the same household...not married," while another participant would have liked "more info on single parents that were never married."

Improve/change videos. The third small theme identified included making changes to the videos shown during the program. Four participants commented on this topic. Two participants stated that the videos need to be "updated." Another participant "did not care for the videos at all." However, some participants indicated that the program materials were quite useful to them, so it is likely that they are perceived differently by different participants.

Presenter preparation. The final small theme had three respondents, and they all commented on the preparedness of the program presenters. Each participant that responded on this topic felt that the presenters could have been better prepared for the class. For example, one participant stated, "The presenters seemed a little unprepared." All three



comments on the preparedness of the presenters came from the same location, which may indicate a localized concern rather than a general need within the program.

#### Usefulness of the *Parents Forever* Program

On the follow-up questionnaire, participants were asked to report what has been the most useful to them since participating in the *Parents Forever* program. Of the 55 participants who completed the follow-up questionnaire, 31 (56.4 percent) responded to this open-ended question. Through qualitative analysis, six main themes were derived from participant responses. These themes included: (1) Co-parenting; (2) Avoidance of behaviors that could negatively impact children; (3) Better understanding of children; (4) Helping children through the divorce process; (5) Communication skills; and (6) Program materials.

Co-parenting. One of the most common responses that participants gave regarding what has been useful to them includes the information presented on co-parenting. Six participants (19.4 percent) indicated that learning about this issue in the program has been useful since their participation. One participant commented on her new success in working with her ex-husband: "I have been better at allowing or asking my ex husband to do things for the kids. He has more responsibilities when it comes to the kids and I am holding him accountable for doing his share of the parenting."

Avoidance of behaviors that could negatively impact children. Another common theme participants commented on was the usefulness of learning about behaviors they should avoid that could be potentially harmful to their children. Six (19.4 percent) of the participants that responded to this question mentioned learning about this subject to be the most useful item for them since participating in the program. One mother reported, "I am

now more careful about what I say in front of my daughter and the tone in which I say it in regards to her dad.” Another behavior mentioned by participants that they have learned to avoid since participating in the program is putting their children in the middle of conflict and issues that belong to the adults.

Better understanding of children. Five participants (16.1 percent) responded that the most useful thing from the *Parents Forever* program is having a better understanding of their children throughout the divorce process and the effects that divorce can have on children. One response was that the program “just opened my eyes to behaviors my child displays.” Another replied that “the most useful thing [he] learned at this class was an ability to understand how this affected [their] son.”

Helping children through the divorce process. The fourth most common theme also included five participant responses (16.1 percent). These participants felt that the most useful thing they took away from the program was information on how to help their children through the divorce process and also realize that they are not to blame for the divorce. An example of this theme was reflected in this participant comment: “The most useful thing I learned at this class was an ability to understand how this affected our son and with ways to help him cope with what was happening.”

Communication skills. The fifth theme identified during the analysis of the usefulness of the program was the value of enhanced communication skills. Four participants (12.9 percent) replied that learning how to communicate with their former partner and their children during the divorce process was the most useful to them since participating in the program. One parent now finds use of “the controlled communication between self and other parent” to be particularly helpful.

Program materials. The final theme related to the usefulness of the program materials for participants after they completed the *Parents Forever* program. Four participants (12.9 percent) commented on the usefulness of the books, handouts, and wallet cards that were provided to them during the class. It should be noted that the themes which emerged here six to eight weeks following participation in the class were identical or similar to those that participants highlighted immediately following their participation in the class.

### **Effects of Participation in *Parents Forever* on Participants' Perceived Knowledge Regarding Divorce and its Effect on Children**

The second primary research question in the study involved what effects participation in the *Parents Forever* program had on participants' perceived knowledge regarding divorce and its effects on children. This question was investigated largely through a series of questions that participants responded to on the post program questionnaire as well as some questions on the follow-up questionnaire.

Participants were asked two questions about their perceived knowledge in the follow-up questionnaire. These questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale with one representing "not at all" and five representing "very much." Means and standard deviations were used to evaluate the participants' responses for these two questions. One question asked the participants to rate how much the program increased their understanding of children and divorce ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). The other question asked how much the program increased their knowledge of healthy parenting ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). On average, the participants rated the program's impact on their increase of knowledge in these two areas as near to "significant."

Paired-sample *t* tests were also conducted to examine the participants' perceived knowledge of many different topics covered in the *Parents Forever* program. Table 4 illustrates the results of the *t* tests as well as the means and standard deviations. In the post program survey, participants were asked to retrospectively rank their prior understanding of various aspects of the divorce process and how children experience divorce, and then again rank these items based on their perceived post program knowledge. The participants ranked their perceived knowledge level on a five-point Likert scale with one representing "low" and five representing "high."

The results of the *t* test analyses indicated that each of the before and after comparisons was statistically significant,  $p < .001$ . This suggests that the mean scores for perceived knowledge after completion of the program are significantly higher than the mean scores for perceived knowledge before completion of the program. Means for these items after participation in the program are between four and five, which indicate that the participants perceived their knowledge to be moderately high to high after completion of the program. The mean differences between knowledge scores before and after program participation were all statistically significant, indicating that participants perceived a substantial impact regarding their knowledge of the divorce process and its effects on children. The seven divorce knowledge areas were: (1) divorce process and stages; (2) children's responses to divorce and grief/loss; (3) patterns to avoid and coping processes to help children; (4) effective communication strategies in co-parenting; (5) management of parenting concerns and keeping children out of the middle; (6) parallel parenting plans; and (7) adjustments for self and children.

Table 4  
*Means and T-test Comparisons for Participants' Perceived Knowledge Levels*

Divorce Knowledge	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
#1 - Before participation	3.78	1.06	--	--	--
#1 - After participation	4.61	0.58	-11.87	206	0.00
#2 – Before participation	3.37	1.08	--	--	--
#2 - After participation	4.57	0.56	-16.93	208	0.00
#3 – Before participation	3.27	0.95	--	--	--
#3 - After participation	4.57	0.58	-19.14	205	0.00
#4 – Before participation	3.10	1.00	--	--	--
#4 - After participation	4.42	0.69	-18.70	203	0.00
#5 – Before participation	3.63	0.95	--	--	--
#5 - After participation	4.51	0.62	-14.20	205	0.00
#6 – Before participation	2.94	1.14	--	--	--
#6 - After participation	4.25	0.81	-16.20	204	0.00
#7 – Before participation	3.21	0.98	--	--	--
#7 - After participation	4.36	0.69	-18.16	205	0.00

**Impacts of Participation in the *Parents Forever* Program on  
 Participants' Relationships and Behavior Following the Program**

The third research question in the study explored what effects participation in the *Parents Forever* program had on participants' relationships and behavior following the program. This question was studied by asking participants to provide responses to a series of retrospective questions on divorce-related behavior and relationship interactions on the follow-up questionnaire six to eight weeks after completing the workshop.

Participants were asked several questions about perceived impacts of the program in general on the follow-up questionnaire. These questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale with one representing “not at all” and five representing “very much.” Again, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were used to evaluate the participants’ responses to these questions. Two of these items relating to perceived knowledge were already identified in the previous section. The means and standard deviations for the five items on the follow-up questionnaire are included in Table 5. Participants noted the program had a “somewhat” to “significant” influence on each item asked regarding perceived impacts. The participants indicated the program positively influenced their skills in “helping [their] children with the divorce process” ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ), changed their behavior somewhat as a parent ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ), and positively influenced their relationship with their child ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ).

Table 5  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Program Impacts*

How much did this program...	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Increase your understanding of children and divorce	3.73	0.83
Increase your knowledge of healthy parenting	3.71	0.86
Increase your skills as a parent in helping your children with the divorce process	3.63	1.06
Change your behavior as a parent	3.23	0.93
Influence your relationship with your child	3.40	1.01

Further analysis was conducted using paired-sample *t* tests to examine the participants' self-reported behavior related to various topics covered in the *Parents Forever* program. In the follow-up survey, participants were asked to reflect on their relationships and behaviors during the three-month period prior to participating in the program as well as their behavior in the six to eight weeks after participation in the program. The answers given were scored on a five-point Likert scale with one representing "never" and five representing "very often." Paired sample *t* test analyses compared the participants' "before participation" and "after participation" mean responses for each behavior measured. Tables 6 and 7 display the results for each statistical comparison conducted.

Of the ten questions asked on divorce-related behavior, six of them focused on *increases* in positive behaviors (e.g., encourage child to spend time with other parent) while four of them focused on *decreases* in negative behaviors (e.g., child observing conflict between parents). Table 6 includes the participant responses to those questions that were designed to assess whether the program had any effect on increasing positive participant behaviors. Results of the *t* test analysis indicated that each of the before-and-after mean comparisons was significant,  $p < .001$ . Thus, according to these results, the mean scores for participants' self-reported behavior after participation were significantly different than the mean scores for behavior before participation. Each of these differences indicates a self-reported improvement in divorce-related behaviors between the two time periods. Participants reported that several weeks following participation in the class they were significantly more likely to encourage children to spend time with the other parent, talk to children about their feelings in the divorce process, cooperate effectively in co-

Table 6  
*Means and T-test Comparisons for Participants' Self-Reported Positive Behaviors*

Divorce Behaviors	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Encourage child to spend time with other parent – Before	3.25	1.16	--	--	--
Encourage child to spend time with other parent – After	3.72	1.05	4.42	49	0.00
Talk to child about feelings in the divorce process – Before	2.85	1.11	--	--	--
Talk to child about feelings in the divorce process – After	3.31	0.97	4.00	49	0.00
Cooperate effectively in co-parenting w/other parent – Before	3.19	1.10	--	--	--
Cooperate effectively in Co-parenting w/other parent – After	3.75	0.98	4.73	49	0.00
Communicate successfully about parenting issues with other parent – Before	2.52	1.22	--	--	--
Communicate successfully about parenting issues with other parent – After	3.22	1.22	4.53	49	0.00
Control angry or negative responses to other parent – Before	3.24	1.08	--	--	--
Control angry or negative responses to other parent – After	3.92	0.83	5.02	49	0.00



(Table 6 continued)

*Means and T-test Comparisons for Participants' Self-Reported Positive Behaviors*

Divorce Behaviors	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Discuss parallel parenting agreements with other parent – Before	1.99	1.20	--	--	--
Discuss parallel parenting agreements with other parent – After	2.67	1.38	5.70	49	0.00

parenting efforts, communicate successfully with the other parent about parenting issues, and control angry or negative responses to the other parent.

In addition to the increases in positive divorce-related behavior regarding interactions with both children and the other spouse, participants also reported on negative behaviors. Table 7 highlights the participant responses and includes means, standard deviations and *t* test comparisons. These items were scored such that a lower score represented an improvement in behavior, meaning a decrease in the reported negative behavior. All of the *t* test comparisons were significant,  $p < .001$ , indicating again that participants reported significantly lower scores on these items following participation in the class. This finding suggests that participation in the class can also result in self-reported reductions in negative divorce-related behaviors in a short-term follow-up process (six to eight weeks following the class). The specific behaviors that participants indicated a decrease in following the class included talking badly about or putting down the other parent in front of children ( $M = 1.85$  before program versus  $M = 1.32$  after program), experiencing conflict with the other parent that is observed by the child ( $M = 2.92$  before program versus  $M = 1.99$  after program), putting children “in the middle” of a difficult

Table 7  
*Means and T-test Comparisons for Participants' Self-Reported Negative Behaviors*

Divorce Behaviors	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Talks badly about or puts down other parent in front of children – Before	1.85	0.79	--	--	--
Talks badly about or puts down other parent in front of children – After	1.32	0.55	-6.54	50	0.00
Experienced conflict with other parent that child observed – Before	2.92	1.25	--	--	--
Experienced conflict with other parent that child observed – After	1.99	0.92	-6.23	50	0.00
Children have felt put “in the middle” of a difficult situation – Before	2.97	1.31	--	--	--
Children have felt put “in the middle” of a difficult situation – After	2.23	1.07	-5.10	49	0.00
Feels angry or upset due to communication difficulties with other parent – Before	4.04	1.06	--	--	--
Feels angry or upset due to communication difficulties with other parent – After	3.50	1.12	-4.25	50	0.00

situation between oneself and the other parent ( $M = 2.97$  before program versus  $M = 2.23$  after program), and feeling angry or upset due to communication difficulties with the other parent ( $M = 4.04$  before program versus  $M = 3.50$  after program).

The responses of participants indicate that they generally reported improvements from before participation to several weeks after participation in their divorce-related

behaviors and relationship interactions following involvement in *Parents Forever*. This pattern was also reported in response to open-ended questions.

#### Reported Behavioral Changes Following the Program

The final open-ended question on the follow-up questionnaire asked participants to report if participation in the class led them to do anything differently during their divorce or separation. Of the participants who completed the follow-up questionnaire, 27 (49.1 percent) answered this question. The qualitative analysis process identified four main themes that emerged in the participant responses. These themes are: (1) Awareness of children's needs; (2) Positive interactions with former partner; (3) Improved communication with children; and (4) Better understanding of children in the divorce process.

Awareness of children's needs. The most common theme among participants in response to this question was an increased awareness and focus by participants on the needs of their children. This pattern included avoiding behaviors that could potentially be harmful to the children (i.e., talking bad about other parent in front of child) and understanding that children benefit from a good relationship with both parents. For example, one participant stated that the program helped her to "be more aware of his [her son's] feelings and his need to have a good relationship with both parents."

Positive interactions with former partner. The second most common theme identified was that participants reported having more positive interactions with their former partner since participating in the program. These participants mentioned that they were able to more easily stay calm when interacting with the other parent, to put aside bad feelings in order to parent, and to use a parallel parenting plan. One participant reported, "My ex-

husband and I are able to put aside our feelings about each other and focus on the needs of our child. We are also able to communicate more effectively. We are more conscious about how our actions and words affect our child.”

Improved communication with children. A small group of participants mentioned that since participating in the program they have improved and increased their communication with their children regarding the divorce or separation process. One participant stated that she now “speak[s] more openly with my children about all of our feelings.”

Better understanding of children in the divorce process. Finally, another small group of participants reported having a better understanding of their children. One participant commented of the program, “[It] helped me to realize the things my son was going through and is still going through before and after the divorce.”

The participant responses indicate that the program impacted behaviors with both children and the child’s other parent in a variety of ways that were positive. These responses provide a portrait of participant reactions to their participation in *Parents Forever* and its influence on their divorce-related behaviors following the program.

#### **Additional Issues Affecting Participation in the *Parents Forever* Program**

The final research question for the study was designed to assess whether there were additional factors identified by participants that affect their participation in the *Parents Forever* program. Questions 17 through 20 on the post-program survey asked participants about how they learned about the program, their interest level in attending the workshop, whether they were required to attend, and about particular barriers to participation.

The first area examined was how participants described the different barriers that existed for them in relation to participating in the workshop. Table 8 illustrates the frequencies and percentages associated with particular barriers to being involved with the program. Ninety-three participants responded to this question. The most common barrier affecting participation was the cost of the class (which is typically \$55 in North Dakota), with 43 percent of participants indicating that cost was perceived as a barrier. The second most common barrier cited was timing of the class, with nearly 41 percent of respondents indicating that time acted as some kind of barrier for them. Distance to travel for participation was also indicated by over a quarter of participants as a substantial barrier (28 percent). Some of the other commonly listed barriers that participants wrote in that they felt affected their participation in the program included having to find child care, the length of the class, and working around their own schedules.

Another issue affecting participation in the program was how participants learned about the program and its availability. Participants were asked to indicate how they learned about the program. Table 9 contains frequencies and percentages for these items. The largest number of participants learned of the program through their attorney or judge (38.5 percent and 31.5 percent, respectively). Most individuals, then, who participate in the program in North Dakota are referred to it through contact with the judicial or legal system. The next most common referral source about the program is social services. Other sources of information about the program, such as a former spouse or program brochures, draw only a small percentage of the participants to be involved in the program.

Table 8  
*Frequencies and Percentages for Barriers in Attending the Program*

Barrier Issues	Frequency	Percent
Timing of the Class	38	40.86
Distance to Participate	26	27.96
Cost of the Class	40	43.01
Other	16	17.20

Table 9  
*Frequencies and Percentages for Sources of Information about the Program*

How did you learn about the program?	Frequency	Percent
Former spouse/partner	3	1.5
Media ad	1	0.5
Attorney	78	38.5
Judge or other legal/court official	64	31.5
Relative or friend	8	3.9
Social Services	22	10.8
Brochure/Flier	6	3.0
Other	20	9.9

In addition to identifying how they learned of the program, participants reported on how they felt about attending the program (their interest level) and whether they were required to attend. Over half of the participants reported that they were interested in and willing to attend the program ( $N = 118$  participants, 58.1 percent). About a third of participants (30.3 percent) indicated they were neutral about attending the class while only a small portion (10 percent) stated that they did not want to attend. Slightly over half of participants were required by the court to attend the program (53.3 percent) and another 7 percent were required to attend for other reasons. The remainder of the participants (39.6 percent) were not required to attend the program.

### Participant Intent in Attending the Program

On the post-program questionnaire, participants were asked to express what their primary intent was in attending the Parents Forever program. Of the 211 participants that filled out the post-test questionnaire, 83 (39.3 percent) completed this question. Qualitative analysis was conducted to identify common patterns and five main themes were derived from this question. The themes represented in participant responses regarding their intent in participating in *Parents Forever* were: (1) To help children through divorce process; (2) To become a better parent; (3) To better understand the effects of divorce; (4) To improve relations with one's former partner; and (5) To comply with court requirements (required to attend by legal official).

To help children through the divorce process. The most common theme that emerged during analysis of this question was the participants' intent to help children through the divorce process. Of the participants who responded to this question, 34 (41 percent) answered according to this theme. Some of the participants responded specifically, for example, discussing such issues as wanting to help their children with the transition between homes. However, most respondents to this question simply stated they wished to help their children. One parent hoped "to learn how to get my child through this," while another simply wanted "to see if I could help my son through this easier." Such comments illustrate that concern for children is a central motivation for many parents who attend the workshop.

To become a better parent. Another common theme identified in the participants' intent in attending the program was to become a better parent. Sixteen (19.3 percent) responses fit into this category. Again, the responses to this question were not very specific

or detailed. Participants expressed hopes the program would help them in becoming a better parent, but generally did not mention any specific areas of parenting in which to better themselves. Two participants mentioned hopes of improving in their co-parenting efforts.

To better understand the effects of divorce. A third common theme found during the analysis was participants' intent to better understand the effects that divorce has on the children involved. Eleven (13.3 percent) of the participants who answered this question recorded responses that fit into this theme. One participant reported wanting to "learn more about what my kids go through." Similarly, another participant stated the intent was to understand "the effects it [the divorce] has on my children."

To improve relations with one's former partner. The fourth theme relating to participants' intent in attending the program focused on improving relations with the participants' former partners. Of the respondents to this question, eight (9.6 percent) listed this as their primary intent in attending. For example, one participant's reported intent was "keeping a positive relationship with my ex for our children's lives." Another person's stated intent was to "learn how to deal with my ex."

To comply with court requirements. The final theme associated with participant intent in attending the program was that they were either required or referred to go to the program by their judge or attorney. Thirteen (15.7 percent) participants listed compliance with court-mandated attendance requirements as their primary intent in attending. For example, one participant noted, "[I was] court ordered but was willing to attend to see if I could learn any additional information to help my children through this divorce."



## Summary

To summarize, the *Parents Forever* divorce education program seemed to provide a variety of identified benefits to those who participated in the program. Parents indicated that they seemed satisfied with the program experience, learned about divorce-related knowledge and how children experience divorce, and made some meaningful changes in their divorce-related behaviors that affect children.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

With the high number of marriages ending in divorce and the increasing number of children being born to unwed parents (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004, National Center for Health Statistics, 2009b), it is important to have educational programs for parents who are experiencing or have experienced a divorce or separation. The purpose of the *Parents Forever* educational program is to help parents going through a divorce or separation in their efforts to cope with the transition for both themselves and their children. Past research on other divorce education programs reveals that there has been some success with these programs reaching parents and caregivers who are caring for a child experiencing a divorce or separation. However, research done on the *Parents Forever* program prior to this study has been limited. Past research on this program has provided information on the participants' perceived knowledge regarding information delivered in the program. The current study looked at participants' perceived knowledge as well, but looked further into participants' self-reported behavior six weeks after participation on topics related to the program. This chapter discusses key findings of the current study, as well as the study implications, its limitations and recommendations for future research.

#### **Discussion of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in the areas of perceived knowledge gain and behavior change due to participation in the program. Based on the results of this study, the *Parents Forever* program appeared to have

overall positive effects on the participants' knowledge about divorce and children and their behavior toward their families and ex-partners.

Like many other divorce education programs, positive effects were noted with the *Parents Forever* program. The program evaluations discussed previously reported both short-term and brief longitudinal impacts in regards to participant knowledge and behavior. Similar to several other program evaluations (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Laufer & Berman, 2006; Shifflet & Cummings, 1999), the current evaluation of the *Parents Forever* program found that participants believed they gained knowledge from the program on topics related to the impacts of divorce on children. The current study also evaluated participants' self-reported behavior to assess any change that may have taken place in how they interact with their children and former partner. Like other program evaluations discussed (Criddle, Jr., et al., 2003; Kurkowski et al., 1993; Zibbel, 1992), the *Parents Forever* program also found that participants reported having increased positive behaviors (i.e., encouraging child to see other parent) and decreased negative behavior (i.e., putting the child in the middle of conflict).

The findings of the current study are consistent with many other program evaluations in that short-term and brief longitudinal results indicate that participants in these programs seem to gain knowledge and work toward using that knowledge to improve relationships with their children and former spouse. These findings are also consistent with those of the previous pilot study of the *Parents Forever* program. In both studies, participants reported being able to communicate better and have a better understanding of what their children are going through during the divorce process. Also in both studies, participants stated that they have been better able to keep their children out of the middle of

conflict since participating in the program. The current study expanded on the negative behaviors to avoid and found that participants reported a significant decrease in negative behaviors as well as a significant increase in positive behaviors.

#### Perceived Value of the *Parents Forever* Program

The first research question was intended to assess how valuable the participants perceived the program to be. Participants responded positively to the first two questions on the post-program survey and follow-up questionnaires, with nearly all participants agreeing that the program is worthwhile and beneficial.

Participants were asked to rate the value of different components of the program. They reported each of the components of the workshop (e.g., instructors, handouts, videos, etc.) as valuable and helpful. The one component of the workshop that did not get rated as highly as the others was the helpfulness of the video clips. The participants reported it as the least helpful part of the workshop.

To assess how valuable participants perceived the *Parents Forever* program to be versus other sources of information, participants were asked to rate how useful the program was along with a variety of other sources (i.e., attorney, friends). Participants found the *Parents Forever* program to be a useful source of information during their divorce or separation process ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). This mean score followed closely behind friends, parents, and attorneys for being useful to the participants during their transition. The least helpful resources for the participants were the child's other parent and media sources such as books, magazines, and the internet. This pattern indicates that the workshop experience ranks highly among possible sources of assistance on divorce. To the researchers'

knowledge, this type of comparison is the first exploration done of how divorce education participants rank their workshop experience versus other sources of information.

Participants were also asked if they would recommend the program to someone else. Approximately 97 percent of the participants responded that they would recommend the program. This finding indicates that the vast majority of participants felt that the program was valuable and beneficial enough to suggest to others that they attend the program as well.

Identified benefits of the program. One of the qualitative questions on the post-program survey was used to assess perceived value by asking the participants to list what they believed were the benefits of the program. Participants felt the most beneficial aspects of the program were learning about the divorce process and parenting issues, increasing their understanding of children's feelings and experiences during divorce or separation, improving communication skills towards the other parent and their children, the program materials, and the group discussion and social support aspect of the program. Participants further reported finding much of the information provided in the program useful, such as the parallel parenting plan and what behaviors to avoid that can negatively impact their children.

Additional information desired by participants. While participants listed many areas of the program that they found helpful, there were some subjects related to divorce/separation on which participants expressed desire for further information. Specific topics mentioned that they would have liked more information on included getting along with their former partner, how to handle some divorce-related issues with their children, and how to manage their children's behavior. Although some of the participants reported

parental discipline as a topic on which they had increased their knowledge through participating in the program, others also listed discipline as a topic on which they would like additional information. However, the focus of the *Parents Forever* program is not on how to discipline children. Therefore, the discrepancy in participant responses here may be due to the fact that some people felt the information was useful in the context of divorce or separation, while others may have thought that the information was not broad enough and would have liked more in-depth information on the topic.

Participant ideas to improve program. Another open-ended question was asked in the post-program survey to evaluate the participants' perceived value of the program. They were asked to list any ideas they had that they thought might improve the program. Participants mentioned shortening the class or splitting it up into two sections. Some participants also reported feeling that the program did not represent never-married couples as well as married couples experiencing divorce. The majority of the responses to this question did not have to do with the content of the program, but had more to do with how to deliver it (i.e., make it a requirement, shorten the length). This suggests that the participants were satisfied with the content and information provided as they did not suggest many ideas for improvement in this area. However, a few participants listed possible changes in the areas of program structure and delivery.

In the current study, participant responses regarding perceived value of the program were mostly positive. The responses indicated that participants found value in the program and that it held some kind of usefulness for their lives and relationships. This positive pattern of responses is similar to findings from other evaluations of divorce education programs, in that participants seem to find the information presented in such programs

helpful during the divorce or separation process (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Criddle, Jr., et al., 2003; Kurkowski et al., 1993; Laufer & Berman, 2006; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Zibbel, 1992).

### Participants' Perceived Knowledge

The participants in this study reported that the divorce-related knowledge they had gained through instruction from the program was greater than their knowledge on that material prior to participating. Statistical tests indicated that participants' perceived knowledge about children and divorce significantly increased from before participation to after participation in the *Parents Forever* program. The largest increase in perceived knowledge was about making a parallel parenting plan. Participants reported a limited understanding of how to do this before they participated, but suggested that they were considerably more knowledgeable about it ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) after participation. Each of the statements on the questionnaire that assessed participant knowledge of program material had statistically significant results when compared to the pre-program scores. This finding indicates that participants felt their knowledge increased in each of the subject areas covered in the program. When asked during the follow-up questionnaire how much the program increased their knowledge, participants reported their gain in knowledge to be moderately high. Taken together, these findings imply that the participants perceive themselves to be learning a significant amount about divorce, children and the coping process through participation in *Parents Forever*.

Additional information desired by participants. One of the open-ended questions asked participants what topics or issues they would like more information about. The largest response to this question came from participants indicating that there were not any

topics or issues that they would like more information about. This response could suggest that, for these participants, the *Parents Forever* program provided enough information on the general topic and met the basic needs of the parents and caregivers who attended the class.

Of those individuals who did desire additional information, the main topics mentioned were managing children's behavior and getting along with one's former partner. Most of the additional topics that participants listed are not in the scope of this particular module of the *Parents Forever* program. While such information would be valuable to parents or caregivers who are undergoing a divorce or separation, the results indicate that most participants did not need further information on most of the topics discussed during the program. The participants may have felt knowledgeable with those topics so they either listed nothing or topics that were not within the scope of the program. As noted, a small group of participants reported desiring more information on getting along with one's former partner and some of this information was provided in the session. Perhaps an optional session could be provided for those who desire further information in this area.

The findings regarding participants' perceived knowledge are somewhat similar to previous findings that emerged in the pilot study of the *Parents Forever* program (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005). Participants in both studies appear to have increased understanding about the divorce process and how to relate to their children. One of the efforts of the current study was to evaluate how participants use this perceived knowledge in their homes and in their lives. The current study aimed to see if the participants would use what they learned in the program to actually change their behaviors or to better help their children through the divorce process.



### Self-Reported Behaviors and Relationships

The follow-up questionnaire in this study was used to assess program impacts regarding the participants' behavior, relationships and knowledge regarding children and divorce. This study found that many participants reported an improvement in their behavior, relationships and knowledge in this area at the time of the follow-up questionnaire.

The changes reported by participants generally were moderate. The responses of participants to questions that asked how much, overall, the program impacted their knowledge and behaviors related to divorce ranged from "somewhat" to "significant." For example, the average rating for the follow-up survey question about the impact on their behavior as a parent was  $M = 3.23$  and the average rating for how the program influenced their relationship with their child was  $M = 3.40$ . A statistical comparison of participant reports of their pre-program and post-program behaviors related to divorce indicated significant positive changes in such areas as talking to their children about their feelings, putting their children in the middle, talking badly about the other parent in front of the child, and encouraging the child to spend time with the other parent. Participants reported a variety of significant changes in their behavior to the specific questions regarding their divorce-related behaviors.

One qualitative question in the follow-up questionnaire asked the participants to report if the program has led them to do anything differently. Not many participants responded to this question. The two most common responses from participants were positively interacting with their former partner and being aware of their children's needs. Although participants reported wanting additional information on dealing with their former

partner, a small group of participants reported experiencing change in this area since participating in the program.

### Issues Affecting Participation

In order to benefit as many individuals as possible with the *Parents Forever* program, it is important to know what kind of issues participants had that may have affected participation in the program. Participants were asked what barriers they had in attending the program. The most common barriers listed included timing, distance, and cost. The cost of the class was the most common barrier listed followed by timing of the class.

The majority of participants also reported hearing of the program from either their attorney or judge. Although not all parents going through a divorce are mandated in the state of North Dakota to participate in a program such as *Parents Forever*, slightly over half of the participants did report that they were required by the court to attend. This pattern indicates that a divorce education program can still operate with much support even though there is no state requirement for divorce education. Most participants also noted that they were either neutral or interested in and willing to attend the class.

Furthermore, participants were asked to describe their intent in attending the program in order to determine any issues that may be affecting participation. The participants' most common intentions were to help their children through the transition, improve their parenting, increase their understanding of the effects of divorce and enhance the co-parenting relationship with their former partner. The participants' stated intentions for attending the program related to topics that are covered as part of the workshop. Therefore, the participants' intentions in attending the class should not have been an issue

that affected participation for them. Knowing this group's primary intentions for attending the class could also help to market the class in the future by emphasizing what it is that the parents want to learn about in the class.

### **Study Limitations**

This study has several limitations that may have impacted the overall results of the analysis. First, the answers to both the post-program and follow-up questionnaires were provided by self-report. At times individuals who are reporting on their own knowledge or behavior may be inclined to provide a response that is biased in a more positive direction. Thus it is possible a self-report bias could have affected participant responses so they rated items more toward their favor than may necessarily be true. However, all of the participants were informed that their answers would be kept completely confidential and were asked to answer the questions as accurately as possible, and this effort was intended to minimize self-report bias in the answers.

Another limitation of this study was the limited response rate from the post-program questionnaire to the follow-up questionnaire. Of the 211 participants that completed the post-program questionnaire, only 55 participants (26.1 percent) completed the follow-up questionnaire. Most of the participants indicated on their initial survey that they would be willing to complete the follow-up questionnaire, and they were given the options of being contacted via phone, e-mail, or postal mail. However, not all of the participants who said they would be willing to continue participation actually did continue by completing the follow-up questionnaire once they were contacted six weeks after participation. The responses on the follow-up survey may have come primarily from individuals who felt more positively about the program or who felt they had some benefit

from the program. So, the limited response rate to the follow-up survey is a limitation which is important to recognize.

Many of the participants in the study did not complete the open-ended questions on each survey. Many of the open-ended response questions were left unanswered by participants on both the post-program and follow-up questionnaires. A larger number of answers to these questions would have provided a better understanding of the topics that the questions were aiming to explore.

There were also limitations in the design of the current study. The current study provided a post-program questionnaire and a follow-up questionnaire, but not a pre-program questionnaire. While the questionnaires were designed to account for this by using a retrospective method and having participants answer for their knowledge and behavior both before and after participation, actually giving the participants a questionnaire on what they know prior to the start of the program may give a more accurate picture of their knowledge and behavior at that point in time. Also, this study did not utilize a control group. Therefore, extraneous variables (e.g., participants receiving similar information from a different source) could have impacted the results. This study also looked at the short-term outcomes of the program by administering a follow-up questionnaire six weeks following participation. However, the study did not continue to measure the perceived knowledge and self-reported behavior after those six weeks to see if there are any longer-term outcomes from the program. While the results from the study are positive, they should be considered with these limitations in mind.

Finally, this study was conducted only in the state of North Dakota. While there was a good mix of male and female participants, the sample was not very diverse due to the

fact that the participants were parents, step-parents or caregivers who were experiencing a divorce or separation in North Dakota. The results of this study may not generalize as well to populations in other parts of the country.

### **Study Implications**

Divorce has the potential to negatively impact the children that are involved. Not only can the experience of divorce do this, but also the family climate that children experience before and after the divorce or separation (Amato, 2000). Therefore, it is important for divorce education programs like *Parents Forever* to be available to parents or caregivers experiencing a divorce or separation. Continued evaluation of divorce education programs, including the *Parents Forever* program, will assist in changing and designing these programs to fit the needs of the parents and their children. The results from the current study can help program developers and facilitators to understand what is successful and what is not in terms of reaching the participants. The program can be modified or supplemented by looking at the results and adjusting the program to what participant needs are and what they did or did not find useful.

Findings from the current study, as well as from other evaluations of divorce education programs, imply that participants believe they become more knowledgeable through participating and begin to apply information they have gained to their lives in the short term. In the current study, the *Parents Forever* program evaluation was taken a step further than the previous study on this program. Rather than providing participants with just one questionnaire immediately following participation in the program, the participants were given another questionnaire six weeks following their participation. This process was used to find out more information on the outcomes of the program for the participants. The

results of this study imply that the program was successful in providing parents and caregivers with needed and valuable information on divorce and its effects on children. The program was also successful with helping these parents and caregivers begin to apply the information they learned to their lives with some success in the short term. These results correspond with the results of other divorce program evaluations in that the participants found their involvement to be useful and valuable.

The participants in this study reported a gain in divorce-related knowledge and moderate changes in behavior following the program. While there seemed to be positive changes according to participants several weeks following the program, participants could possibly lose some of the self-reported gains they have made as time goes by. It may thus be beneficial to the participants to continue to send out informational materials or even offer a short “refresher” course to remind parents of this information and keep it in the front of their minds.

The results of this study also imply that the program was successful in helping parents and caregivers improve upon some of their behaviors to better help their children through the divorce process. Continuing to provide information to these parents can assist them in continuing with the improved behaviors.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study is similar to other divorce education program evaluations in that it provided questionnaires to assess knowledge and behavior, measured variables at two different time periods, and looked at short-term results. Further research on this program should continue to add to the knowledge base of program evaluation literature regarding this program and divorce education in general. In future studies on the *Parents Forever*

program, researchers could utilize a different methodological approach and add a pre-program survey to get a more accurate understanding of the participants' perceived knowledge prior to participation in the program. Also, researchers could add more follow-up questionnaires or administer interviews over longer periods of time to assess whether there are any long-term effects of participating in the program. Additionally, future studies on this program could provide the participants with follow-up information after they have completed the program to help them remember the information and then assess the results.

Future research on this program may also be conducted using different methods in order to account for some of the limitations of the current study. For example, due to the self-report bias of having participants report on their own behavior, it may be beneficial to measure the perceptions of other people in the participants' lives who may observe the behaviors (i.e., children, new spouse, etc.). Also, to increase the response rate of participants who completed the follow-up questionnaire, future studies may use incentives to encourage the participants to complete all of the questionnaires. Adding a control group may be another possibility for future research in order to control for extraneous variables.

### **Conclusion**

Research has shown that parents experiencing a divorce or separation may benefit from participating in a divorce education program. Not only can these programs be beneficial for the individuals with their own coping process, but it can help the children as well. When parents learn about how the divorce process affects their children and what they can do to mitigate negative outcomes, both the children and the parents can go through the transition with more ease. The *Parents Forever* program is one such program that has been shown to be beneficial to divorcing or separating parents or caregivers. Participants

have reported short-term benefits from participating in the four-hour session. It is important to keep evaluating *Parents Forever* and other divorce education programs to continue working towards meeting the needs of parents and caregivers experiencing this difficult life transition.



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APPENDIX A

PARENTS FOREVER POST PROGRAM QUESTIONNAIRE

# \_\_\_\_\_

Parents Forever: Education for Families in Divorce Transition  
**PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please answer each question or statement to the best of your ability.  
 This questionnaire does not have right or wrong answers. Your answers will be kept confidential.  
 Please complete each question as appropriate.  
 When you are finished, please return the questionnaire to the survey provider.

1. I took the Parents Forever class in \_\_\_\_\_ County.

Please circle the number that fits with your answer.

Parents Forever	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. I felt the Parents Forever session was worthwhile for me.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think the Parents Forever class would be beneficial for all divorcing parents.	1	2	3	4	5

Listed below are several areas of knowledge regarding children, parents and the divorce process. First, please rate your level of knowledge on each statement from before participation in the Parents Forever session. Next, please rate your level of knowledge on each statement after participation in the Parents Forever session. Rate your knowledge on the scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = low and 5 = high.

Area of Knowledge                      Low                      Moderate                      High

4. My understanding that divorce is a complex process involving many stages	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
5. My understanding of how children are affected by divorce due to grief/loss and varied responses at different ages	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
6. My understanding of patterns to avoid that might hurt children and what I can do to help them cope with the divorce process	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5

continued in next column

Area of Knowledge                      Low                      Moderate                      High

7. My understanding of effective communication strategies to use with my former partner during divorce and how I can use them in co-parenting	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
8. My understanding of how to manage parenting concerns during divorce and keep children "out of the middle" of issues with the other parent	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
9. My understanding of how to make a parallel parenting plan	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
10. My understanding of tips to help myself and my children adjust in following a new pathway in life	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Before Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5
<u>Now, After Participation</u>	1	2	3	4	5

Please respond to the following questions using this scale:  
 1=Not at all to 5=Very much. Circle the appropriate response.

Workshop Questions	Not at all	Slightly	Some- what	Much	Very much
11. The workshop instructors were well-prepared.	1	2	3	4	5
12. The workshop instructors presented the material well.	1	2	3	4	5
13. The workshop instructors provided information that will help me.	1	2	3	4	5
14. The handouts/handbook provided will be helpful to me.	1	2	3	4	5
15. The video clips were helpful to me.	1	2	3	4	5



Please respond to the following questions and provide a specific response.

16. Would you recommend Parents Forever to someone else?  Yes  No

17. How did you learn about the Parents Forever program?

- (1) Former spouse or partner
- (2) Media ad
- (3) Attorney (\_\_\_\_\_)
- (4) Judge or other legal/court official (\_\_\_\_\_)
- (5) A relative or friend
- (6) Social services
- (7) Brochure or flier
- (8) Other \_\_\_\_\_

18. How did you feel about attending this class?

You may mark more than one answer.

- (1) I was interested in and willing to attend the class.
- (2) I was neutral about attending the class.
- (3) I did not really want to attend the class.
- (4) I was required by court to attend the class.
- (5) I was required to attend the class for other reasons.
- (7) Other \_\_\_\_\_

19. Did you have any particular barriers in attending this class?

You may mark more than one answer.

- (1) Timing of the class
- (2) Distance to participate in the class
- (3) Cost of the class
- (4) Other \_\_\_\_\_
- (5) Other \_\_\_\_\_

20. What was your primary intent in attending the Parents Forever program?

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21. I am:  Male  Female

22. My relationship status is:

- (1) Considering separation or divorce
- (2) Separated from partner
- (3) In the divorce process
- (4) Completed the divorce process
- (5) Never married to child's other parent

23. The most helpful things to me in this workshop were:

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24. Please list any topics or issues you would like more information about.

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25. Please list any ideas you feel would improve this program.

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*Thank you for your participation!*

APPENDIX B

PARENTS FOREVER FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

# \_\_\_\_\_

**Parents Forever: Education for Families in Divorce Transition  
PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE #2**

Please answer each question or statement to the best of your ability.  
There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers will be kept confidential.  
When you are finished, please return the questionnaire to the survey provider.

1. I took the Parents Forever class in \_\_\_\_\_ County.

Please circle the number that fits with your answer.

Parents Forever	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. I felt the Parents Forever session was worthwhile for me.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think the Parents Forever class would be beneficial for other divorcing parents.	1	2	3	4	5

Listed below are a variety of actions related to children, parents and the divorce process. First, please reflect on and indicate your frequency of each specific behavior now at the present time. Next, please rate your frequency of each behavior in the three-month period prior to participation in the Parents Forever session. The rating scale is from 1 to 5, with 1 = never and 5 = very often.

		Never	Seeldom	Some-times	Often	Very Often
4. How often do you encourage your children to spend time with their other parent?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
5. How often do you talk badly about or put down the other parent in front of children?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
6. How often have you experienced conflict with the child's other parent that children observed?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
7. How often do you talk to your children about feelings they are experiencing in the divorce process?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
8. How often do you think your children have felt put "in the middle" of a difficult situation between you and the children's other parent?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5

		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
9. How often do you feel you've cooperated effectively in co-parenting children with the other parent?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
10. How often do you think you've communicated successfully about issues of parenting with the other parent?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
11. How often have you felt angry or upset due to communication difficulties with the other parent?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
12. How often have you been able to control angry or negative responses to the other parent in handling family issues?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
13. How often have you discussed parallel parenting agreements with your children's other parent?	<b>Now, After Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>3-Month Period Before Participation</b>	1	2	3	4	5

Please respond to the following questions using this scale: 1 = Not at all to 5 = Very much. Circle the appropriate response.

Overall, how much did this program:	Not at All	Slightly	Some-what	Signif-icantly	Very Much
14. Increase your understanding of children and divorce?	1	2	3	4	5
15. Increase your knowledge of healthy parenting?	1	2	3	4	5
16. Increase your skills as a parent in helping your children with the divorce process?	1	2	3	4	5
17. Change your behavior as a parent?	1	2	3	4	5
18. Influence your relationship with your child?	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Workshop Responses</b>					
19. The workshop materials (handouts, etc.) have been useful to me.	1	2	3	4	5
20. The workshop helped me be more attentive to my children's needs in the divorce process.	1	2	3	4	5
21. The workshop helped me assist my children in the coping process.	1	2	3	4	5
22. The workshop helped me manage difficulties in the divorce process more effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
23. The workshop helped me work more effectively with my child's other parent in co-parenting.	1	2	3	4	5

Please respond to the following questions and provide a specific response.

24. I am:     Male     Female

25. My relationship status is:

- (1) Considering separation or divorce
- (2) Separated from partner
- (3) In the divorce process
- (4) Completed the divorce process
- (5) Never married to child's other parent

26. Please rate how useful each of the following sources of information has been for you in the separation or divorce process.

	Does Not Apply	Not At All Useful	Slightly Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
a. Your parents	0	1	2	3	4	5
b. Child's other parent (person you're separating from or divorcing)	0	1	2	3	4	5
c. Other relatives or in-laws	0	1	2	3	4	5
d. Friends	0	1	2	3	4	5
e. Attorney	0	1	2	3	4	5
f. Judge and/or court system	0	1	2	3	4	5
g. Divorced friends or people you know	0	1	2	3	4	5
h. Counselor or social service worker	0	1	2	3	4	5
i. Books, magazines or newspapers	0	1	2	3	4	5
j. The Internet	0	1	2	3	4	5
k. <i>Parents Forever</i> class and materials	0	1	2	3	4	5
l. Other _____	0	1	2	3	4	5
m. Other _____	0	1	2	3	4	5

27. Since participating in *Parents Forever*, what information, skills or resources from the workshop have been most useful to you?

28. Has participation in the workshop led you to do anything differently during this family transition? If so, what?

Thank you for your participation!

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT COVER SHEET

**Parents Forever:  
Education for Families  
in Divorce Transition**

**PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE #1**

ID Code # \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Contact Information*

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone (    ) \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

(Please write clearly)

**Note:** Your personal information will be kept private and identified only to the project director and researchers at NDSU. Your cooperation is most appreciated.

Please check if you are willing to participate in a brief follow-up survey in 6 weeks:

\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_ No

If yes, please indicate if you would rather be reminded and participate in the brief follow-up survey by regular mail, e-mail, or phone:

\_\_\_ Regular Mail              \_\_\_ E-Mail              \_\_\_ Phone              \_\_\_ Any

**APPENDIX D**  
**INFORMED CONSENT LETTER**

Informed Consent for Participation in Research

[Date]

Dear Parent:

We are Sean Brotherson, a professor in Child Development and Family Science at North Dakota State University, and Christina Masich, a graduate student in the same program. We are conducting a research project to evaluate the *Parents Forever* program and the experience of parents who participate in that program. Understanding the experience of parents in this program will help us to improve its quality and respond to the needs of parents experiencing separation or divorce.

Because you are a participant in this program, we would like to invite you to assist us and take part in this study by sharing your thoughts and experiences with us. Your participation is entirely voluntary. However, your participation would be appreciated and help us to understand and improve the *Parents Forever* program. If you are willing to participate in this project, please keep this letter for your information.

You will receive an evaluation form at the conclusion of the *Parents Forever* class, which should take about five to seven minutes to complete. Please read the instructions and complete the entire survey, along with the cover sheet. Six weeks following your participation in the class, you will have the opportunity to complete a similar brief follow-up evaluation via e-mail, regular mail, or phone. Please indicate on your cover sheet which option you would prefer to use. We may contact you via one of the other methods if the option you choose is not successful. In appreciation for your participation, those who complete the evaluations will receive a set of NDSU Extension publications on children, families, and separation/divorce.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but we have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known risks to you as a participant. Risks might include loss of confidentiality and emotional or psychological distress. Personal information will be protected by substituting an ID code, limiting the information to those involved on the research team, and keeping all information in a secure location.

By taking part in this study, benefits may include receiving information about dealing with separation or divorce or becoming aware of helpful resources. Further, benefits to others and society may include improvements to the *Parents Forever* program, understanding of parental needs in the divorce process, and greater public support for educational resources to support families in need.

We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. Your identity will not be revealed in the results of this study, and any information shared from this study will only be made in summary form. You will not be identified in written materials. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from participating at any time, with no penalty to you.

If you have questions about this project, you can contact Sean Brotherson at (701) 231-6143 or [sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu](mailto:sean.brotherson@ndsu.edu), or you can contact Christina Masich at (701) 231-8534 or [christina.masich@ndsu.edu](mailto:christina.masich@ndsu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may talk to the researchers or contact the NDSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (701) 231-8908, [ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu](mailto:ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu), or by mail at NDSU Institutional Review Board, 1735 NDSU Research Park Dr., Fargo, ND 58105.

Thank you for your willingness to be a part of this study. We hope that your experience with *Parents Forever* has been positive. Your time is appreciated and the information you share will be a great benefit to the program.

Sincerely,

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Phone: (701) 231-6143

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