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The Development, Evaluation, and Implementation of Parenting-focused Prevention Programs in Collaboration with Family Court

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Abstract

Promoting the well-being and best interests of children in separated and divorcing families is a shared value among family court professionals and prevention scientists who develop and evaluate intervention programs. This article chronicles the development, evaluation, and implementation of two programs – the New Beginnings Program (NBP), a parenting intervention for separated/divorcing parents and the Family Transitions Guide (FTG), an intervention designed to motivate high conflict separated/divorcing parents to attend the NBP. The development and evaluation of these programs was facilitated by a long-standing collaboration with Maricopa Family Court. We discuss the process of developing these programs, their underlying small theories, and the evaluation of their effects in randomized trials. We also describe our collaboration with the family court and ways that the court promoted the development and evaluation of these programs. Finally, we summarize lessons learned and discuss future directions to bolster the public health impact of evidence-based programs for separated/divorcing families.

Keywords

parental separation/divorce; evidence-based programs; implementation science; child mental health; family court-researcher partnerships

Prevention scientists and family court professionals share the goal of improving the lives of individuals and families. Family court professionals strive to promote the health and well-being of children whose parents utilize court services to obtain a legal divorce or settle parenting time disputes. For example, the Association of Family and Conciliation Court (AFCC) articulates its mission as improving the lives of children by reducing family conflict, a well-established source of stress that confers risk for children's mental and physical health and well-being. As a collaborative association of family court professionals, AFCC relies on education and research to identify best practices to optimize outcomes for court-involved parents and their children. Part of the Society for Prevention Research's mission is to develop programs and policies for which there is scientific evidence to support widespread implementation because they either prevent problems or promote well-being

in the areas of physical, mental, and behavioral health. Prevention scientists use research findings on risk and protective factors associated with negative outcomes to design programs and then carefully evaluate their effectiveness using experimental study designs (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009).

Parental divorce and separation, which require some involvement with the court system, are family transitions of high interest to prevention scientists and family court professionals concerned about promoting children's mental health and well-being. Currently, more than 8 million children in the United States live with a divorced or separated parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and there is compelling evidence that divorce confers risk for mental health problems (e.g., Amato, 2001, 2010), substance use and abuse (e.g., Paxton et al., 2007), physical health problems (e.g., Troxel & Matthews, 2004), and impairments in developmental competencies (e.g., Amato, 2001). The high prevalence of divorce and separation and their association with deleterious outcomes indicates that effective prevention programs that are widely implemented could significantly reduce the public health burden of parental separation and divorce.

Collaboration of prevention scientists with family court professionals is critical to reduce the public health burden of parental separation and divorce because the ability of effective programs to have widespread impact hinges on their accessibility. If services are to reach separated/divorcing families on a large scale, they must be offered within the service delivery system that has contact with these families. Family courts are the socially sanctioned system through which legal separations and divorces are granted and thus have access to this population at a critical time in the separating/divorcing process.

Parenting programs for separated/divorcing parents are provided in the majority of family courts in the United States. As of 2016, 46 states mandate some type of parenting classes (Mayhew, 2016). Although many of the currently implemented programs have been shown to be highly acceptable to parents, very few of them have been rigorously evaluated to assess their effects on parenting and children's health and well-being (Salem et al., 2013; Sigal et al., 2011). A law review showed that a single post-test assessment, without information about pre-program functioning and without a control group, is the prevailing method of evaluating parent education programs (Mayhew, 2016). In their review of 14 court-related parent education programs, Sigal and colleagues described evaluations that tested program effects on the stated program goals, such as improving the parent-child relationship or the co-parenting relationship after parental separation/divorce. They found that there was little convincing evidence that programs are achieving their stated goals (Sigal et al., 2011). A nationwide survey found that despite adjustment of children being the primary objective of parent education programs, very few assess the impact of parent participation on children's outcomes (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999). Several researchers have emphasized that the lack of rigorous evaluations of the majority of programs implemented in family court leaves us with no clear answer regarding whether or not these programs are effective (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999; Mayhew, 2016; Sigal et al., 2011). It is critical that programs are tested using strong research designs. Without evidence of their positive effects, implementation of programs may be ineffective and thus a waste of resources. Moreover, there are numerous examples

of psychosocial interventions that have iatrogenic or harmful effects (Dimidjian & Hollon, 2010; Lilienfeld, 2007), stressing the critical importance of rigorous evaluation.

From the perspective of prevention science, parenting-focused programs that are evidenced-based (i.e., rooted in theory and shown to have positive effects on their intended outcomes in rigorous evaluations) are likely to have the largest impact (Sandler et al., 2015). Findings of a national survey of key informants from 154 courts showed that the majority of courts endorsed the importance of evidence-based services for separated/divorcing families. For example, 95% stated that evidence-based interventions would be helpful to families, 74% believed that such interventions should be offered in their court, and 75% indicated that key stakeholders would support offering them (Cookston et al., 2007). These court professionals also identified potential barriers to implementing such programs, such as funding, length, and cost. Seventy-one percent noted that funding would be a barrier to adoption and sustainment. Respondents also raised concerns about the level of parent involvement, with 53% raising concerns about parent attendance.

In the remainder of this article, we describe how two parenting-focused programs for separated/divorcing families were developed in collaboration with family court, the New Beginnings Program (NBP) and the Family Transitions Guide (FTG). We discuss the nature of these programs, the theoretical mechanisms through which they are expected to promote child well-being, and the results of their evaluations. Finally, we reflect on the progress made thus far and discuss future directions to bolster the public health impact of evidence-based programs for separated/divorcing families. We hope this article will contribute to future collaborations between family court and prevention scientists to advance the development and implementation of programs that promote the well-being of children from separated/divorcing families (Salem et al., 2013).

The New Beginnings Program

Development and Evaluation.

The NBP is one of the most well-researched parenting programs for separated/divorcing parents. The developers began by designing the earliest version of this program based on their clinical observations of the problems that children faced after divorce combined with research on potentially modifiable factors that were found to be correlated with children's outcomes. At the time, the literature indicated that five primary factors predicted how children fared after divorce: the quality of the mother-child relationship, how much their mothers used effective discipline, the amount of contact they had with their fathers, the support received from other adults in their lives, and their exposure to negative divorce-related events, such as the degree of conflict between their parents (See Wolchik et al., 1993 for support for these factors). Based on this research, the developers designed the program to target these risk and protective factors, hypothesizing that changes in these factors would lead to improvements in children's mental health problems. In selecting the strategies to change most of these risk and protective factors, the program developers relied on cognitive-behavioral strategies that had been found to be effective in the literature on parenting programs to reduce children's mental health problems. For others, they relied on their clinical experience and intuition to develop change strategies.

The NBP was designed to teach skills to change these factors in an engaging and effective manner. First, the program relied on adult learning theories to help parents learn new skills through a process that involves first understanding why the skill is important, then observing the skill being done well and role-playing the skill in-session, and finally, putting the skills into practice in their daily lives. Second, the didactic material was presented in a conversational, interactive style, and parents were encouraged to share their experiences. Third, leaders reinforced parents for trying the skills and making small gains and used a collaborative approach to develop solutions for challenges the parents encountered. In addition, leaders promoted group cohesion to increase the effects of the support mothers provided others for skill use.

The NBP was originally designed to be delivered in a group format. This was both a practical and theory-based decision. Not only are group programs much less costly to implement than individual programs, but they also promote parents learning from each other and supporting each other's use of the program skills. Importantly, the NBP is versatile enough to be delivered in a group or individual format.

The NBP has been tested in two randomized controlled efficacy trials and one randomized controlled effectiveness trial. The goal of an efficacy trial is to assess effects of new interventions in a tightly controlled research setting, such as a university, whereas effectiveness trials evaluate intervention effects in real world settings where the program would likely be delivered following the research (Onken et al., 2014). In the two efficacy trials, the program targeted families in which the children lived primarily with their mothers because, at that time, the vast majority of children lived with their mothers after divorce and groups for fathers were not practically viable. In one of the efficacy trials, the parenting-focused program was augmented by a program delivered to the children that was designed to improve their coping. Because the child program did not produce beneficial effects beyond what was gained in the mother program (Wolchik et al., 2000), subsequent versions of the NBP focused solely on intervening with parents.

Both efficacy trials demonstrated improvements in quality of parenting, including increased parental warmth and effective discipline, and, importantly, children's mental health outcomes relative to the control condition (Wolchik et al., 1993, 2000). Long-term follow-ups of the sample in the second trial showed wide-ranging benefits that lasted for many years after program completion. For example, six years after the program, when the offspring were adolescents, the NBP reduced alcohol use, marijuana use, other drug use and polydrug use, number of sexual partners, prevalence of diagnosis of mental disorder in the past year, externalizing problems (e.g., aggression) and internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) (Wolchik et al., 2007). It also improved grades and self-esteem (Bonds et al., 2010), educational and vocational aspirations (Sigal et al., 2012), and adaptive coping (Vélez et al., 2011). Fifteen years after the program, when the offspring were young adults, the NBP reduced use of mental health services; criminal justice system involvement; and incidence of internalizing disorders, such as depression and, for males, substance use (Wolchik et al., 2013). It also improved work competence (Wolchik et al., 2020), attitudes toward parenting (Mahrer et al., 2014) and attitudes about marriage and divorce (Wolchik et al., 2019). Not only did the NBP improve a wide range of outcomes, it was also cost-

effective. A conservative cost-benefit analysis of the NBP indicated that participation in the NBP resulted in \$1,630 in cost savings per family associated with mental health and criminal justice system utilization in the one-year period before the fifteen year follow-up (Herman et al., 2015).

The analyses from these trials on whether the change strategies were successful in changing the targeted risk and protective factors (see Table 1 for an overview of the program theory) were used to modify the program. For example, the component on increasing the support children received from other adults did not lead to increased support so it was dropped to make room for an additional session on effective discipline. The program was also modified so it would be appropriate for a wider audience of families and less costly to deliver. Illustratively, the program, which was originally designed for divorced mothers, was adapted for never-married parents and fathers, as well. In addition, the NBP developers worked with experts to ensure that the NBP was culturally broad (Wolchik et al., 2009). The program developers formed a cultural advisory board of other scientists with extensive experience with cultural adaptations of evidence-based programs (see Wolchik et al., 2009 for a detailed description of the adaptation process). The cultural advisory board identified areas that would require adaptation and facilitated gathering input from culturally diverse providers and divorced parents. Using these data, the developers modified some of the examples of activities and rationales for using the program skills, added culturally diverse skills modelling videotapes, and included attention to how the skills could be compatible with individual preferences. The program was also optimized for more efficient delivery. It was reduced from 12-group plus one in-person and one phone individual sessions to 10-group and two phone-sessions, and the format of delivery was changed from a written manual to a DVD, which allowed the sessions to be led by one, rather than two, leaders.

The adapted NBP was tested in a large-scale effectiveness trial in collaboration with four family courts in Arizona. The trial included 830 divorced, separated, and never-married fathers and mothers with children between ages three and 18 (Sandler et al., 2020; Tein et al., 2018). The evaluation tested the 10-session NBP as compared with a randomly assigned, brief two-session program which discussed the same skills, but did not involve home practice in using the skills. Because this was a large and ethnically-diverse sample (i.e., 59.4% non-Hispanic White, 31.4% Hispanic), the researchers could investigate whether the program worked better for families with certain characteristics, including parent gender and ethnicity, child age, and interparental conflict.

In the analyses that compared the NBP to an active control condition, ethnicity moderated some effects (Sandler et al., 2020). Although the NBP improved discipline and monitoring for all parents, improvements on parent-child relationship quality and child mental health problems at posttest occurred in non-Hispanic White but not Hispanic families. Also, younger children whose parents were in the NBP reported fewer internalizing problems at posttest than those in the active control condition, but there was no effect for older children. At the 10-month follow-up, the program effects on child monitoring were greater for older children and for parents who reported higher levels of interparental conflict, and non-Hispanic White but not Hispanic parents and children in the NBP reported fewer internalizing problems. In analyses that compared the NBP to no intervention rather than

the two-session comparison group (Tein et al., 2018), fathers, but not mothers, in the NBP condition reported significantly greater parent-child relationship quality, lower child exposure to interparental conflict, and fewer instances of children internalizing problems at posttest. At the 10-month follow-up, Hispanic, but not non-Hispanic White, parents in the NBP reported significantly lower child internalizing problems (Tein et al., 2018). Also, parents in the NBP reported significantly lower child internalizing problems for children 9 years old or older but not for younger children. Our evaluation also found that the more parents were successful in their home practice of the program skills, the more their children benefitted (Berkel et al., 2016).

Individual and group training to deliver the NBP is available. Because the program developers believe that delivering the program with high quality and fidelity is critical, interested providers are required to participate in an initial 3-day training and to be supervised during delivery of their first group.

The Role of Family Court in NBP.

The program developers initiated their collaboration with the family court with a request for the court's assistance with their research on children's post-divorce adjustment. The court facilitated the researchers' access to divorce records, which enabled the researchers to more quickly complete studies to identify the risk and protective factors to target in their intervention. In the early days of their collaboration, the researchers developed an ongoing relationship with a family court administrator, Russ Schoeneman, who had a strong interest in promoting science and felt that the relationship between the court and the university was a positive endeavor. Over the years, the researchers and family court professionals engaged in mutually beneficial collaborations; the court provided access to potential participants, and the researchers assisted the court in developing and evaluating court services (for a more in-depth review of the collaboration, see Sandler et al., 2012).

Once the NBP had been developed, the family court served as a partner in facilitating recruitment (Sandler et al., 2012; Wolchik et al., 2009) into the experimental evaluations of the program. The court's involvement in these projects was likely motivated by the alignment of gaining knowledge about whether this program helped children's post-divorce adjustment with its aspirational mission to reduce negative outcomes of separation/divorce for children. Although the potential benefit of having an effective program to offer as a court-connected service might have also played a role, the court understood that the program might not have positive effects and that any possible benefits to the court would clearly not be immediate.

The court provided critical support for all the trials. In the efficacy trials, the court provided access to court records that were used to identify families that met basic eligibility criteria (e.g., divorced in the prior two years) and would be invited to participate in the studies. To help the developers prepare for the effectiveness trial, the local family court facilitated recruitment for preliminary studies that were necessary to adapt the program for a more diverse group of parents. During the effectiveness trial, four courts in Arizona, including our local court, played an invaluable role. Because the program developers were interested in assessing the effects of the NBP when provided as a collaboration between the

courts and community mental health agencies (rather than as a university-based program), the developers needed to recruit community agencies with experience delivering similar parenting programs. The courts helped recruit these agencies by issuing a competitive request for delivering the NBP. Selection of applicants was conducted jointly to ensure that the agencies had the capacity to deliver the program, as determined by the research team, and were viewed positively by the court. The court also assisted with recruitment of parents by showing a brief DVD in its mandated parent education classes. This invitational DVD described the study and invited parents who agreed to be randomly assigned to the 10-session NBP or a brief two-session program to participate in the study. Further, representatives from the family court served on an advisory board to oversee and support the implementation of the effectiveness trial.

Although it has been shown that the NBP led to lasting improvements in multiple domains of functioning and its costs were more than recovered through its savings (Herman et al., 2015), few courts have adopted this program. After the trial, our local court adopted the NBP as an ongoing service in collaboration with the mental health agency that provided the program during the trial. Currently, the NBP is being offered by two other courts in the United States. Part of the limited uptake is likely due to the cost of the program. It may also be related to the fact that the cost savings of the NBP were to systems other than the family court (e.g., mental health care, criminal justice system).

The Family Transitions Guide (FTG)

Impetus and Overview.

Unlike the NBP, which was designed to reach a wide audience of separated/divorcing parents, the FTG was developed to target a subgroup of these parents, those who are court-ordered to attend a program for parents whom the court believes are experiencing high levels of interparental conflict. Developing effective programs for high-conflict separated/divorcing parents is a particularly high priority for both prevention scientists and family court professionals given the risk high conflict confers to children and parents, as well as the mental health care and court systems costs incurred by these parents.

There is compelling research that has shown that exposure to high levels of interparental conflict accounts for much of the increased risk among children whose parents separate or divorce (Amato, 1993, 2010; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Johnston, 1994). Further, exposure to post-separation/divorce interparental conflict is associated with multiple types of mental health disorders and problems for children, such as depression and anxiety, conduct problems, physical health problems, and risky health behaviors (Elam et al., 2019; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Kalmijn, 2016; Long et al., 1988; Noller et al., 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). For example, in our research, we found that children exposed to high interparental conflict in the first few years after parental divorce were more than twice as likely to have a diagnosable mental health disorder six years later, compared to those exposed to lower levels of interparental conflict (O'Hara et al., 2019).

Family court professionals are interested in providing services to high conflict separated/divorcing families for several reasons. One reason is a cultural change in the court,

which increasingly emphasizes the importance of protecting children from exposure to high interparental conflict because of its negative effects on their well-being (Schepard, 2004). A second reason is the hope that providing services to high-conflict families will reduce re-litigation of divorce agreements, which is a major drain on court resources. High-conflict parents use a disproportionate amount of court resources, by filing motions and relitigating child-related and financial issues (Saini et al., 2016).

The FTG was developed through an active collaboration with the courts and is an example of the co-development of a program by the courts and prevention scientists. When the FTG was being developed, high-conflict parents in our local county were court-ordered to attend a four-hour parenting education course focused on conflict resolution (Neff & Cooper, 2004). Much like many of the brief, psychoeducational programs offered by family courts across the United States (Salem et al., 2013), parents rated the course as highly acceptable. However, an evaluation indicated that the course did not change parents' behaviors that could buffer children from the problems, such as internalizing and externalizing problems, associated with exposure to high levels of interparental conflict (see Sandler et al., 2012, pages 295–296 for description of the evaluation study). These findings provided an impetus for the family court and prevention scientists to join forces to develop a court-ordered program that would serve to promote parents' enrollment in the NBP. Thus, the goal of FTG was to provide a brief program that could be delivered by the courts and would motivate parents to realize their goal of helping their children adjust to the separation/divorce and identify behaviors that would affect the likelihood of achieving that goal. The rationale was that if the FTG achieved the goal of motivating parents to take steps to help their children adjust to the separation/divorce, they would be more likely to attend the more intensive NBP. See Table 2 for an overview of the FTG's program theory.

The Role of Family Court.

In the development of the FTG, the family court played a central role in all stages of the process, from developing the program, completing the randomized comparative effectiveness trial and disseminating the results of the collaborative project in a journal article (i.e., Hita et al., 2009). The development of the program was one of collaboration and cooperation of all involved, a process that was rooted in the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (see Hita et al., 2009 for a full description of the process). Two prevention scientists and two trainees, six representatives from the family court, and six community stakeholders (i.e., two parent representatives of local advocacy groups, two community practitioners, an administrator of a community agency, a community advocate for cultural minorities) comprised the planning committee that guided the development of the FTG. The committee met five times over the course of a year. Critical joint decisions were made, including (1) to focus the team's attention on post-decree parents embroiled in legal conflict, and (2) to design the program to be court-ordered with the option to attend a more intensive evidenced-based program. The family court professionals emphasized that the program would have to be court-ordered to get the vast majority of high-conflict parents to attend. The prevention scientists had reservations about focusing on post-decree parents who were returning to court to relitigate their divorce decree. This reservation was based on prior findings that legal conflict was not as highly related to child well-being as was

interpersonal conflict and was only moderately related to interpersonal conflict (Goodman et al., 2004). They also initially resisted the idea of mandating the program because prior evaluations of the NBP had been conducted with parents who voluntarily attended the program. The prevention scientists acceded to the court preferences on both of these issues, which was an important step in building the collaboration. To the surprise of the researchers, the advisory committee was not interested in providing input on the content of the program, considering that to be an area of expertise of the researchers.

The planning committee had numerous conversations about the cost-effectiveness of implementing FTG and procedural issues related to designing and executing a randomized comparative effectiveness trial to evaluate FTG. The partnership was especially instrumental in the evaluation phase. Consensus was reached quite readily on the value of randomization to the FTG or existing program for high-conflict parents. The major issues that needed to be negotiated were the logistics of coordinating the court decision making and randomization. The court managed all administrative arrangements including mandating attendance, providing space, and other logistics.

Description of the FTG.—The FTG is a four-hour program that was court-ordered for parents who are seen as having high levels of legal conflict. The small group program is comprised of interactive exercises and active discussion. It is based on motivational interviewing, a set of strategies that help individuals make decisions for themselves based on what is important to them (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). In this case, parents are encouraged to decide what they need to do for the benefit of their children. The program activities were designed to help parents identify personal goals for their children after the divorce and assess whether their current parenting and co-parenting behaviors would help realize these goals. They were then encouraged to identify ways to build their children's resilience and find strategies for overcoming barriers to reaching this goal. At the end of the program, the leader described the NBP as a way of learning skills to achieve their goals of promoting their children's resilience by strengthening positive parenting and reducing conflict. Parents were then given an opportunity to enroll in the NBP.

Evaluation of the FTG.—The FTG was evaluated in a randomized comparative effectiveness trial in which the FTG was compared to the existing program offered by the court, Parent Conflict Resolution (PCR) (Braver et al., 2016). The PCR was comprised of didactic material and lectures detailing the negative effects of interparental conflict on children. Results from the trial indicated that children of parents who participated in the FTG reported feeling less caught in the middle as compared to those in the PCR. Parents' reports were mixed. Fathers, but not mothers, reported less interparental conflict in the PCR condition and mothers, but not fathers, in PCR reported fewer co-parenting problems. The FTG also marginally decreased children's reports of their behavior problems relative to PCR, but there were no significant differences according to parents' report. The FTG did not improve positive parenting (i.e., acceptance, rejection, child's perception of feeling loved and important) by either child- or parent-report, nor parents' report of their own mental health problems. Further, there were no significant effects on parents' report of parenting time problems or visitation flexibility. However, data gathered from court files showed that

FTG significantly reduced legal conflict compared to PCR for those parents who were represented by a lawyer. Importantly, the FTG did *not* significantly increase participation in the NBP. Despite the NBP being offered at no cost, the rate of attendance was very low in both conditions (2% in PCR; 6% in FTG; Braver et al., 2016). These rates are similar to those in the two randomized trials of NBP, which indicated that although 53–62% of parents expressed interest in response to the invitational DVD shown in the brief mandated parenting education program, only 7–8% attended one or more sessions (Winslow et al., 2018) and to those found for other parenting programs that were offered under real-world conditions (1–17%) (Fagan et al., 2009; Spoth et al., 2007).

The FTG has not been evaluated further nor implemented in family court. The program developers indicated that the take-home message of the evaluation is that although the program was seen as acceptable by parents and could be implemented in the court's existing service delivery system, it did not have cross-reporter effects to reduce either interparental conflict or child mental health problems (Braver et al., 2016). From the perspective of promoting evidence-based programs to reduce the negative effects of parental separation/divorce, the trial suggests that a revised, short, motivationally-based court-ordered program may have potential to promote child well-being and reduce court costs, but it is not a viable avenue for recruiting high-conflict parents into a more intensive, voluntary program.

Summary and Lessons Learned

The family court played a critical role in the development and evaluation of both the NBP and FTG and will continue to be an active partner in future projects. As we have described, the development and evaluation of the NBP and the FTG were conducted through different collaborative approaches. In the NBP, the family court played a sustained and crucial but less direct role. Although supporting the rigorous program of research was aligned with the mission of the family court (i.e., reducing negative outcomes for separated/divorcing families), the direct benefit to families took many years to realize. The court provided assistance with recruitment over nearly three decades! It has only been within the last several years that this investment is yielding the benefit of offering the program as a court-related service. And the court's capacity to reap benefits of the NBP for the families it serves is limited because the NBP is much lengthier than other court services and costly to implement. Further, it does not reduce relitigation, an outcome that has significant relevance to the court's mission.

In the FTG, the court was immersed in every step of the process. It had a voice in identifying the problem that the program would address, selection of the other members of the planning group, population to target (i.e., high-conflict, relitigating parents), and method of involving parents (i.e., court-ordered participation). The court reaped the benefits of its investment shortly after the trial. It learned not only about the effects of the FTG but also how it compared to its in-house program. It learned that, although more evidence is needed, a short court-ordered program may have the potential to reduce relitigation by high conflict families. It also learned that the program was not effective in motivating high-conflict parents to opt in to a multisession, skill-building program. This lack of enrollment is likely the reason that the court now offers NBP primarily through court orders.

The work on the NBP and FTG provides several lessons about the development, evaluation, and implementation of parenting-focused prevention programs in family court. The most important takeaway is the critical role of community partners. The research on the NBP and the FTG could not have been done without the cooperation and support of our local family court. Throughout our lengthy collaboration, the research and resulting parenting programs had numerous champions. Many judges, directors of conciliation court, and clerks of the Family Court played invaluable roles.

The second lesson involves the minimal level of parent enrollment in and court adoption of the NBP. Even when the program was free, a small percentage of parents enrolled. To date, only three courts have offered the NBP. Logistical barriers (e.g., scheduling conflicts) were the primary reason parents provided for not attending (Winslow et al., 2018); cost is likely the primary reason for the lack of adoption by the courts. As a solution to these problems, a digital version, eNBP, has been developed and was recently evaluated in a randomized trial. The eNBP reduced parent and child reports of interparental conflict and child internalizing problems, as well as child reports of externalizing problems for boys. It also improved parent and child reports of parent-child relationship quality and effective discipline (Wolchik et al., under review). It is a five-hour program consisting of 10 lessons, each of which can be completed in about 30 minutes. The program makes extensive use of home practice as a critical tool for teaching the core parenting and conflict reduction skills. Because it does not require attending in-person sessions and will cost significantly less than the group program, the eNBP is likely to have much greater uptake than the group program. The eNBP may be considered as an option to fulfill state-wide mandates for parent education. However, it will be imperative that the program developers work with family courts to ensure that the eNBP fulfills all of the legislative requirements, including records of completing each session and a certificate of program completion, and that it meets other needs courts view as important in adopting new programs including evidence of effectiveness (Smith-Daniels et al., 2008).

Future Directions

There are many directions for our work, all of which reflect a continual improvement perspective. As discussed earlier, widespread adoption and sustainment of effective programs, such as the NBP, are needed to reduce the public health burden of parental separation/divorce. This goal can only be accomplished with ongoing streams of funding for programs. One possible source of funding involves increasing filing fees for separating/divorcing parents so the program costs for the subset of parents that judges feel need the program could be covered. Another involves courts partnering with mental health agencies to apply for federal funding, such as those offered by the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant (SABG) program through Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (SAMHSA). Also, as noted by Rudd and Beidas (this issue), understanding the organizational (e.g., culture, workflow) and system-level (e.g., laws, regulation, financing) determinants of implementation could identify barriers and facilitators to program adoption. These data will be useful for developing strategies to increase adoption and sustainment of the NBP and other effective programs.

The costs and lack of adoption of the NBP highlight the need for developers to design or adapt programs that include the crucial elements (i.e., education, motivation, and skill-building) needed to produce meaningful, lasting change for children's mental health and well-being that fit better within the constraints of the court's service delivery system. Given that the eNBP will be much less expensive to implement than the NBP, an important research issue is the examination of its long-term effects. Researchers might also study the effects and cost-benefit of digital versus in-person delivery (i.e., eNBP vs. group-based NBP), as well as evaluate whether a coaching component for the eNBP has additive effects.

Another important direction involves more fully understanding moderators of the NBP's effects. Although a comprehensive process of cultural broadening was conducted prior to the effectiveness trial, in comparison to an active control, only non-Hispanic White parents benefited from the NBP in terms of parent-child relationship quality and child mental health problems (Sandler et al., 2020). These differential effects may be due to lower attendance among Hispanic parents (Berkel et al., 2018) and a greater likelihood of discontinuation after the first few sessions among Hispanic mothers (Mauricio et al., 2017). Given that culturally robust interventions are critical for achieving a population-level impact of parenting programs (Gonzales, 2017), additional attention to ways to increase attendance and maintain engagement among Hispanic families is important. In addition, although the effectiveness trial included both previously-married and never-married parents, the number of never-married parents prevented meaningful comparison of the effects in these groups. Never-married parents are an important group because cohabitating parents are up to five times more likely to separate than married parents (Osborne et al., 2007) and disproportionately face challenges with shared parenting (Maldonado, 2014). Thus, future research should examine whether the NBP is robust across family structures.

Improving services for high-conflict parents is an additional important direction for future research. Building on the lessons learned in FTG and the NBP, we are developing a brief, sustainable intervention to reduce interparental conflict. There are two main objectives of this program of research. First, we will design the program to be contextually appropriate for high-conflict parents, addressing their unique needs and challenges so that the program skills fit the parents' needs and that they feel heard and validated (Hardesty & Chung, 2006; Mandarino et al., 2016; Mauricio et al., 2017). For example, an effective program will likely need to highlight the role of regulation in emotionally-charged situations, address safety concerns, and improve engagement strategies. We will use human-centered design strategies (e.g., qualitative interviews, user testing sessions), which have been shown to improve implementation and effects of psychosocial interventions (Lyon & Koerner, 2016) to ensure that the program is acceptable and useful for parents and valuable and scalable from the perspective of the family court. We will also draw on the lessons learned from the NBP (i.e., home practice of program skills drives program effects) and infuse skill-building activities into the intervention.

Conclusion

Parental separation/divorce is highly prevalent. Nearly half of all children in the United States experience parental divorce before age 16 and about 8 million children live with a

divorced parent (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Estimates indicate that many more children experience the separation of parents who were never legally married (Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Decades of research shows that parental separation/divorce confers elevated risk for the development of problems across areas of children's lives, including mental health, physical health, social functioning, and academic attainment. Reducing the public health burden is a goal shared by prevention scientists and family court professionals. The development and evaluation of the NBP and FTG exemplify the progress that has been made by their collaborative efforts. However, there remains work to do. We will continue to work collaboratively with the family courts to design interventions that are effective and will be widely implemented in the court so that they can make a large impact on the public health burden of parental separation and divorce.

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Brief Biography:

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Sharlene A. Wolchik, Ph.D. has been conducting research on risk and resilience factors that affect the well-being of children following divorce for the past 35 years. Dr. Wolchik is a Professor in the Psychology Department and Director of the REACH Institute at Arizona State University. She is a recipient of the Stanley Cohen Award for Research from the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. In her work, she has focused primarily on the role of parents in promoting children's healthy adaptation to the divorce. She has co-developed, along with Irwin Sandler, the New Beginnings Program, a parenting-after-divorce program. Three randomized controlled trials of this program showed multiple program effects in several domains of functioning, with some effects lasting up to 15 years later. She is collaborating with the Family Court in Maricopa County and the National Center for State Courts to identify ways evidence-based can be integrated into court services for divorced/separated families.

Irwin N. Sandler, Ph.D. is a Research Professor in the Department of Psychology and the REACH Institute at Arizona State University. Dr. Sandler received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Rochester in 1971. He spent his full academic career at the Department of Psychology at ASU from 1971 to the present, when he is a Regents' professor emeritus and Research Professor in the REACH Institute. He directed a National Institute of Mental Health–supported Prevention Research Center from 1984 until 2010, which focused on the study of resilience for children who experience major life stressors and the development and evaluation of preventive interventions to promote resilient outcomes for these children. His major areas of research include the development and evaluation of intervention programs that promote resilience for children following parental divorce.

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Key points:

- Collaborations between family law professionals and prevention scientists promote the shared objective of improving well-being and preventing risk for children who experience parental separation/divorce.
- Implementing rigorously-evaluated, evidence-based parenting programs in family court can be a cost-effective approach to reduce problem outcomes of children following separation/divorce.
- Collaboration of prevention scientists with family court professionals is critical to reduce the public health burden of parental separation/divorce on children.

Table 1

The NBP program theory

Program Component	Targeted Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Increased positive family activities○ Increased one-on-one time○ Increased attention for desirable behaviors○ Improved listening skills	Increase parent-child relationship quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Clarification of Rules and Expectations○ Monitoring of Misbehaviors and Consequences○ Increased Consistency	Increase Effective Discipline
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Anger Management○ Listening Skills	Decrease Exposure to Interparental Conflict

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Table 2

The FTG program theory

Program Component	Targeted Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Increased identification of concerns and goal for children ○ Increased ability to assess whether current parenting / co-parenting behaviors are compatible with achieving goals for children ○ Increased ability to identify strategies to overcome barriers to building resilience in children ○ Increased ability to identify ways to build children's resilience 	<p>Increase motivation to help children be resilient after divorce</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Description of a free twelve-week program to learn and practice skills to strengthen parenting and reduce conflict after divorce ○ Opportunity to enroll in the program 	<p>Encourage voluntary participation in a longer, evidence-based program</p>

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