

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Can online parent education meet the needs of the courts and improve the well-being of children? The critical roles of goal, program, and evidence alignment

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Abstract

Parent education in family courts can significantly impact children's well-being after divorce if programs are (1) widely accessible, (2) acceptable to parents, (3) feasible to implement by courts, and (4) have evidence of effectiveness in improving key outcomes for children. In light of recently raised concerns about whether court-ordered/court-mandated parent education is justified, to it is critical to identify effective parent education programs. Online parent education programs have the potential to be widely accessible, acceptable to parents and courts, and effectively promote children's well-being. However, few effective online parent education programs are being widely adopted by family courts. There is some controversy about whether online parent education meets the needs of family courts in being cost-effective programs that offer ways to hold parents accountable for their participation. We articulate the wide array of goals for parent education programs and present a framework to identify and select programs that meet specific goals. We discuss access, cost, evidence of effectiveness, acceptability, credibility, and compliance tracking. We highlight two online parent education

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programs to illustrate differences in contexts and goals and to show that online programs have great potential to be effective in accomplishing goals valued by the courts.

KEYWORDS

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

Key Points for the Family Court Community

- Online parent education programs have considerable promise to accomplish multiple goals of parent education programs delivered through courts.
- Courts need to consider how online parent education programs align with their jurisdiction's specific goals, including statutory requirements.
- Ideally, online parent education programs will be designed to accomplish the goals of all stakeholders, including family court personnel (judges, administrators, and service providers), family law professionals (attorneys, mediators, mental health providers), and participating parents.
- The family law community needs a systematic way to evaluate and communicate to stakeholders the evidence that online programs accomplish their stated goals.
- Online programs that claim to be evidence-based should specify the outcomes that have been evaluated and the corresponding level of evidence of effectiveness to impact those outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing chorus from multiple sources urging state and local officials to reconsider the appropriate role of parent education programs, especially as court-ordered or court-mandated services. There is a strong focus on the need for programs to demonstrate effectiveness in accomplishing specific goals (Mayhew, 2016; O'Hara & Cohen, 2023; Salem et al., 2013; Sandler et al., 2024). This paper discusses online programs as a promising approach to meeting the various goals that have been described for parent education programs in family courts. We articulate the wide array of stakeholder goals for parent education programs and discuss the features of online programs that can be expected to accomplish these goals. We then present a framework that courts may use to align parent education program goals with the features of online programs as delivered universally to all divorced/separated parents and to selective sub-groups who are seen as at elevated risk for, or who are already experiencing, problems related

to the well-being of their children. We discuss critical issues in the evaluation of online programs and illustrate how these issues may be addressed to align evidence of program effectiveness with the goals of the family court. Finally, we illustrate the utility of the framework by discussing how two existing parent education programs align their complementary but distinct goals and features to develop evidence of their effectiveness. We recognize that the topics discussed in this paper could be relevant to a range of program delivery methods, including face-to-face or webinars. We concentrate here on the potential of online programs to meet the needs of diverse communities, especially those for whom traditional delivery methods are not readily available or feasible.

Parent education programs for separated/divorcing parents are used by family courts in 46 U.S. states (Mayhew, 2016; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008) and other countries across the globe (e.g., Hald et al., 2020; McKenzie & Bacon, 2009; Parkinson, 2013). Laws vary by jurisdiction as to whether and how parent education courses are mandated for divorcing or separated parents of minor children. In some states, divorcing/separated parents are required to attend a parent education program regardless of the circumstances. In others, parent education laws defer to the presiding judge to require one or both parents to attend. Beyond state laws, the requirement may be established by a county or local jurisdiction. For example, Fackrell et al. (2011) explained that most jurisdictions mandate attendance in parent education by county-wide or district-based mandates, or rely on judicial orders for program attendance.

STATE OF THE SCIENCE—PROMISES AND CAUTIONS OF ONLINE PARENT EDUCATION

The promise of online parent education programs for use by family courts is supported by a growing body of evidence that online parenting programs can protect and promote the well-being of children in a wide range of contexts, including for children who have experienced parental divorce (Spencer et al., 2020; Wolchik et al., 2022). However, the various ways online parent education programs accomplish specific goals in the family courts have not been clearly articulated. In addition, although there is evidence that online programs can meet the needs of multiple populations (see Fackrell et al., 2011; Herrero et al., 2023; Sandler et al., 2024; Schramm & McCaulley, 2012), not all online parent education programs are effective. Illustratively, two randomized trials failed to find strong support that commonly used online parent education programs accomplish a range of goals such as improving family functioning, child well-being, resolution of legal agreements, or relitigation (Rudd et al., 2015, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2023). On the other hand, a randomized trial found significant effects of an online program to accomplish the goals of strengthening positive parenting, reducing interparental conflict, and reducing child mental health problems (Wolchik et al., 2022). Online programs vary significantly, and it may be that features such as content, length, teaching approach, and intended population determine whether they are effective in achieving their goals.

BEGIN AT THE END—GOAL ALIGNMENT IN ONLINE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A discussion of parent education in the family courts must first consider the goals these programs are expected to accomplish. Multiple studies have described great variability in the goals of parent education programs. For example, Sigal et al. (2011) identified several goals in a review of 14 parent education programs, including improving divorce agreements (e.g., regarding parenting time and child support), increasing parents' knowledge about the effects of divorce on children, and promoting family processes that protect the well-being of children (e.g., increasing positive co-parenting behaviors and quality of parenting by both parents, reducing interparental conflict).

Parent education programs also differ on multiple dimensions in their approach to accomplishing their goals. For example, some programs focus on teaching skills whereas others primarily provide didactic information. Most programs, to some extent, educate parents about how conflict resolution skills may minimize the impact of their

separation on their children (Salem et al., 2013). Although they may learn the merits of using effective co-parenting skills, there are limited opportunities to practice using these skills or to individually problem-solve barriers to skill use, in part due to short program duration and large class sizes (Bowers et al., 2011; Schramm & Becher, 2020). Programs also vary in content (topics covered), length (number of sessions), delivery modality (in-person vs. online), teaching strategies (lecture, modeling, practice), and the extent to which they address legal issues involved in divorce (Braver et al., 1996; Schramm et al., 2018; Schramm & Becher, 2020).

Courts need to consider these factors when selecting a program that is aligned with their jurisdiction's specific goals. For any program to be effective, its goals should be reasonable to achieve given its content, length, population served, and teaching strategies (Salem et al., 2013). For example, a brief one-to-two-hour program that uses few court resources and covers state-mandated topics should not be expected to impact parenting or co-parenting behaviors, levels of interparental conflict, the well-being of children, or the difficulties encountered by parents embroiled in high conflict divorces. On the other hand, a skills-based parent education program that does not address topics that are mandated to be covered by the state statute cannot be expected to impact knowledge or awareness of those issues.

Goals of family courts

Goals for parent education vary across jurisdictions, with a common theme of promoting child adjustment through positive co-parenting and conflict resolution (Schramm & Becher, 2020). Some jurisdictions delegate the responsibility of defining the details of parent education to local authorities or authorized facilitators who design programming based on their own favored approaches to positively influence the lives of parents and children experiencing separation/divorce. For example, Kansas courts are required to inform parents about the impact of separation/divorce on children (Kansas Statute § 23-3214), but other requirements vary by county-level mandate and case-specific court orders. In Johnson County, parents are required to attend a co-parent education course but the specific class they take is determined by their court order (Johnson County Government, 2023). Many jurisdictions offer guidelines and a certification process for approved parent education courses. For example, in 2005, the New York State Unified Court System implemented the New York State Parent Education and Awareness Program (PEAP) codified by Administrative Rule 144. PEAP certifies independent providers to offer in-person and asynchronous online parent education programs designed to help parents navigating divorce or separation reduce family stress and protect their children from parental conflict (NYS Courts, n.d.). Other jurisdictions outline the goals of parent education through required content specified by state statute (Kierstead, 2011). Illustratively, since 1997, Arizona state statute has required that all new divorcing parents of minor children and unmarried parents with custody access disputes attend a parent education program focused on their children's needs (Arizona Revised Statute § 25-351). The course must be completed before parties participate in family mediation. Per A.R.S. § 25-351(B) and (C) and the Arizona Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), all programs shall include but shall not be limited to education on a set of specific topics. The AOC directives offer the framework to increase the standardization of programming throughout Arizona. Still, jurisdictions define the specifics for themselves. For example, the Pima County (Tucson) Family Center of the Conciliation Court's (FCCC) parent education program's mission statement is "*to promote the public welfare by preserving, promoting and protecting family life and the institution of matrimony, to protect the rights of children, and to provide means for the reconciliation of spouses and the amicable settlement of domestic and family controversies*" (Arizona Revised Statute §25-381.01).

Goals of parent participants

The goals of parents who participate in parent education programs are not often prioritized in the context of court-ordered or court-mandated programs. However, parents' satisfaction plays a critical, albeit indirect, role in the

effectiveness of parent education programs. If parents do not view the program as acceptable, useful, and appropriate to their situation, they will not fully engage in the material and thus, may not reap the full benefits of what they are learning. Research has demonstrated that separated/divorcing parents' negative experiences with court-connected interventions can leave them feeling unheard or invalidated. For example, in a study of parents with high levels of interparental conflict, 22% reported feeling this way (Mandarino et al., 2016). This is especially important because parents' regular use of the parenting and conflict resolution skills they learn is key to maximal benefit, at least for skill-based parent education programs (Berkel et al., 2016). The best available data indicate that parent education programs for separating/divorcing parents should be designed to be engaging and relevant and thus, more likely to accomplish their stated goals. Although not sufficient, program acceptability is likely to be helpful in accomplishing a wide range of goals including increasing knowledge of risk factors and intent to change, as well as actual behavior change to reduce conflict, improve child outcomes, and reach and maintain agreements.

In addition to impacting engagement, parents' goals are also important because there are limits on how the court can intervene in citizens' lives, especially concerning their right to make parenting decisions. Courts, and judicial officers in particular, have to balance competing priorities – the best interests of the child standard, as the current prevailing principle guiding the family law dispute resolution (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016), and parental autonomy (Troxel v Granville, 530 U.S. 57, 2000). Parent perceptions of court-connected programming and the evidence of their effectiveness can influence how parent education is regarded and whether it is maintained by state law, as illustrated in the recent case of a parent's published editorial raising concerns about mandatory parent education (Elton, 2020) and a subsequent temporary suspension of parent education program attendance in Massachusetts (Suspension of Probate and Family Court Standing Order 2-16: Parent Education Program Attendance, 2021).

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: RECONCILING GOALS ACROSS STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders vary across jurisdictions, including but not limited to family court administrators, judges, service providers, parents, and allied family law professionals such as attorneys, conciliators, mediators, court-appointed advisors, parenting coordinators, and mental health providers. Setting program goals with multiple stakeholders often requires organization, collaboration, and engagement in an intentional (and sometimes iterative) process to identify the range of possible goals, and then prioritize and select goal(s) that are feasible given the constraints of the setting. It may not be possible to accomplish the goals of all stakeholders but involving them in the program development process can increase the chance of success. As an example, O'Hara and Cohen (2023) argued that a parent education program for high-conflict families can accomplish the goals of family courts *and* meet the needs of separated/divorcing parents. They outlined five goals that represent a unified perspective of prevention science and family court, including that parent education programs should (1) be preventive, (2) be offered early in the separation/divorce process, (3) focus on behavior change, (4) be scalable and sustainable, and (5) be data-driven. This is an illustrative example of how considering multiple perspectives can help articulate common goals.

Stakeholders may also identify multiple goals. In their public health model, Salem et al. (2013) delineate three levels of parent education with different goals for distinct populations: universal programs to inform all parents undergoing divorce or separation, selective programs targeting those with a heightened risk to their children's welfare, and indicated programs for individuals whose actions may jeopardize child well-being. Table 1 serves as an illustrative example of how these programs might be conceptualized within this model, showing how program types could align with their respective goals. The first column describes the population of divorcing/separated parents who receive the program. The second column describes the goals of parent education including how these goals reflect the court's values, policies, and legal mandates. The third column describes the features of the online program. The last column describes examples of evidence of program efficacy to achieve the intended goals. Once goals are articulated for specified populations, stakeholders can design new or select existing parent programs that align with these

TABLE 1 Table illustrating alignment of program goals, features, and evidence of effectiveness.

Population served	Goals	Features	Effectiveness
	<i>Stated goals, theoretical and empirical foundation and alignment with court values and policies</i>	<i>How parents are involved, content, length, modality, resource requirements, teaching strategies</i>	<i>Demonstrated program effectiveness in accomplishing its goals</i>
Universal programs			
All divorced/separated parents [education-focused]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet statutory requirements. • Increased knowledge. • Increased motivation for behavioral change. • Scalable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content: educational • Instructional design: didactic, teaching information. • Retention and compliance: required by statute; knowledge check. 	Evidence of effectiveness to... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate parents about the impact of separation/divorce, family reorganization, and family litigation, • Educate parents about ways to minimize harmful effects on children.
Selective programs			
Families at risk for problem outcomes [prevention-focused]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced use of court resources. • Evidenced behavior change. • Scalable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content: educational and motivational • Instructional design: interactive; teaching and practicing skills. • Retention and compliance: sometimes court-ordered; requires engagement to proceed. 	Evidence of effectiveness to... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change parenting behaviors. • Prevent child problems. • Increase agreement rates. • Prevent relitigation.
Indicated programs			
Families with more serious problems [treatment-focused]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidenced problem reduction. • Accessible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content: educational, motivational, prescriptive • Instructional design: intensive, multi-component • Retention and compliance: often court-ordered; requires report by treatment provider 	Evidence of effectiveness to... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce intense conflict behavior. • Maintain compliance with agreements. • Reduce child problems.

stated goals. It is important to note Table 1 is intended to serve as a model and does not preclude the potential for significant within-level variability with regard to program goals and markers of efficacy. As such, the table should be viewed as a flexible guide, open to adaptation when applied to the complex realities of program evaluation and implementation.

DESIGNING GOAL-ALIGNED ONLINE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Online parent education programs can be intentionally designed with features that align with their different goals. In the next sections, we present two examples of online parent education programs being used in family courts. We describe the goals of each program and discuss how their features align with the goals the program seeks to accomplish. We describe program features using a framework derived from prior reviews of online parenting programs and online programs for divorced/separated parents (Bowers et al., 2011, 2014). The framework includes five program features: theoretical and empirical foundation, content, instructional design, retention and compliance, and

evaluation. The theoretical and empirical foundation includes the program's use of prior scholarship and empirical research to support the information provided. For example, information presented on the effects of interparental conflict on children should be based on current evidence from research. Program content varies widely and can include a focus on the child and parent adjustment, parenting, conflict, and co-parenting between the parents, court processes and procedures, and issues required by state-level judicial offices (e.g., domestic violence). Instructional design refers to how the information is presented to parents, including how it is organized, the extent to which it is easy for parents to navigate, program length, the use of text, verbal presentations, multimedia, interactive activities, and access to additional supportive material. For example, a program designed to teach skills for conflict reduction should use instructional design approaches that have been demonstrated to impact actual skill use, such as increasing motivation to use skills, modeling, home practice, and feedback to resolve problems in skill use. Retention and compliance include features of the program that are designed to increase retention in the program and to monitor and document program compliance for reporting back to the court. Evaluation refers to the research conducted evaluating the program's outcomes. We present these examples to illustrate how the family law community could adopt a standard in which all programs are clearly described in a way that is specific about goals, program features, and the level and nature of the evidence that the program achieves its goals. Court decision-makers can use these descriptions to identify programs that are aligned with their goals, include features that are consistent with their resources, and have evidence that they accomplish the goals of the court. These two programs provide good illustrations of how different online parent education programs can be used in the family courts to address different populations, accomplish different, but complementary, goals, and employ design features that are aligned with their distinct stated goals. The criteria used to evaluate the evidence for the effectiveness of these programs also differ.

EVALUATING GOAL-ALIGNED ONLINE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Online parent education programs, including the two that we present here, have considerable promise to accomplish multiple goals of parent education programs delivered through courts. But, as a family law community, we need a systematic way to evaluate the evidence that online programs are attaining their stated goals. Thus, before we describe these illustrative examples and evidence for their effectiveness, we first discuss an important general issue: what is meant by claiming that a program is evidence-based?

Evidence of what?

The nature of the evidence needs to specify the outcomes of the program, positive or negative, that are being claimed. One benefit of being specific in our use of the term evidence is that it compels members of the family law community to clarify the goal they are claiming. For example, parent education programs may have one or more of the following goals: (1) compliance with state guidelines for the content of parent education and parent satisfaction with the program; (2) increase parents' knowledge of factors that affect the well-being of children following divorce, (3) create change in family processes that protect and promote the well-being of children (e.g., reduce conflict, strengthen parenting and reduced child problem outcomes), and (4) promote the effective and efficient legal processing of separation/divorce cases and reducing relitigation of agreements. Once these goals are specified, the outcomes observed can be linked to the goals and the claim of evidence-based can specify the goal that the program accomplishes.

Level of evidence

The claim of evidence-based should also specify the level of evidence. The level of evidence for a program's effect(s) depends on the research methods—in particular, the study design—used to evaluate the program. More rigorous

research methods increase confidence that the program “works” to achieve specific outcomes. Specifically, the rigor of the research affects the likelihood that there is a plausible alternative explanation (other than the program) causing the observed effect. This is referred to in the scientific literature as “threats to internal validity” (Giannatasio, 1999). Critical to this issue is the difference between the internal and external validity of research studies (Shadish et al., 2002). Internal validity refers to the extent to which the research design addresses or eliminates alternative explanations for the study results, other than the program's effects. For example, would the observed change have occurred as time passed, with or without the program? External validity refers to the extent to which the study results can be generalized to different participants in different contexts. For example, would a program that has good evidence for accomplishing a specific outcome when implemented in a court in Arizona also work for families in New York? If there is some reason to believe that the participants are systematically different from the population of parents who will participate in a parent education program in a different context, the benefits found for the program in one study may not be achieved when the program is implemented in the new context.

The inclusion of a control group that does not receive the program (or control condition, as seen in designs such as interrupted time series where people serve as their own controls over time [Biglan et al., 2000; Mills, 2019]) and randomization—greatly influences inferences that can be made about program effects (Giannatasio, 1999). Thus, the study design plays a large role in determining the level of confidence one can draw that the program caused the positive changes observed in the parents who participated and can reasonably be expected to continue to exert those positive effects on parents who participate in the program going forward. Study designs used to evaluate programs come in numerous variations, but they can be grouped into three main categories: (1) non-experimental design, (2) quasi-experimental design, and (3) experimental design, each adding design elements that increase its internal and external validity (Baker, 2017; Shadish et al., 2002). See Figure 1 for a schematic of study designs and the corresponding interpretation of results.

In a non-experimental design, also referred to as an open trial, the research assesses a single group of parents participating in the program without a comparative control group or condition (Mark & Reichardt, 2009). This approach is often termed a pre/post design, comparing outcomes before and after program participation to assess change over time. By gathering data before the program starts, the study can credibly infer that any observed reduction in conflict levels among parents' post-intervention was not already present beforehand. A study using an open trial design can reasonably conclude, for example, that the average level of conflict reported by the parents who participated in the parent education program was higher at the pretest than it was at the post-test. It is possible that the reduction in conflict was caused by their participation in the program. But alternative explanations are also possible. The reduction in conflict may be due to the passage of time or the number of times people are asked about conflict or an unrelated event (such as a news article about interparental conflict) that appeared at the same time the study was being conducted (Shadish et al., 2002). In this case, the passage of time is a particularly compelling alternative explanation because there is a well-documented effect in the literature that the level of interparental conflict after separation/divorce spontaneously reduces as time passes after the divorce for the vast majority of families (O'Hara et al., 2019; Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

In a quasi-experimental design, often referred to as a controlled trial, the added element that enhances the study's internal validity is the inclusion of a non-randomized control group or condition. A non-random control group could be parents seen by a neighboring family court. This ability to compare results mitigates the risk of some confounding variables, like timing and historical factors, from influencing the outcomes (Handley et al., 2018; Shadish et al., 2002), but it cannot rule out other plausible alternative explanations. A two-group quasi-experimental design can reasonably conclude that the average reduction in the level of conflict was higher for parents in the program group than it was for parents in the control group. Similarly, a single-group quasi-experimental study, which observes participants at multiple time points before and after an intervention without a separate control group, could demonstrate a distinct shift in parent conflict levels immediately following the introduction of the program. Unlike an uncontrolled pre-post design, the interrupted time series design involves multiple observations over many time points, both before and after the program's start, offering clearer insight into the causal link between the program

Schematic representation of study design features and corresponding interpretation of study results

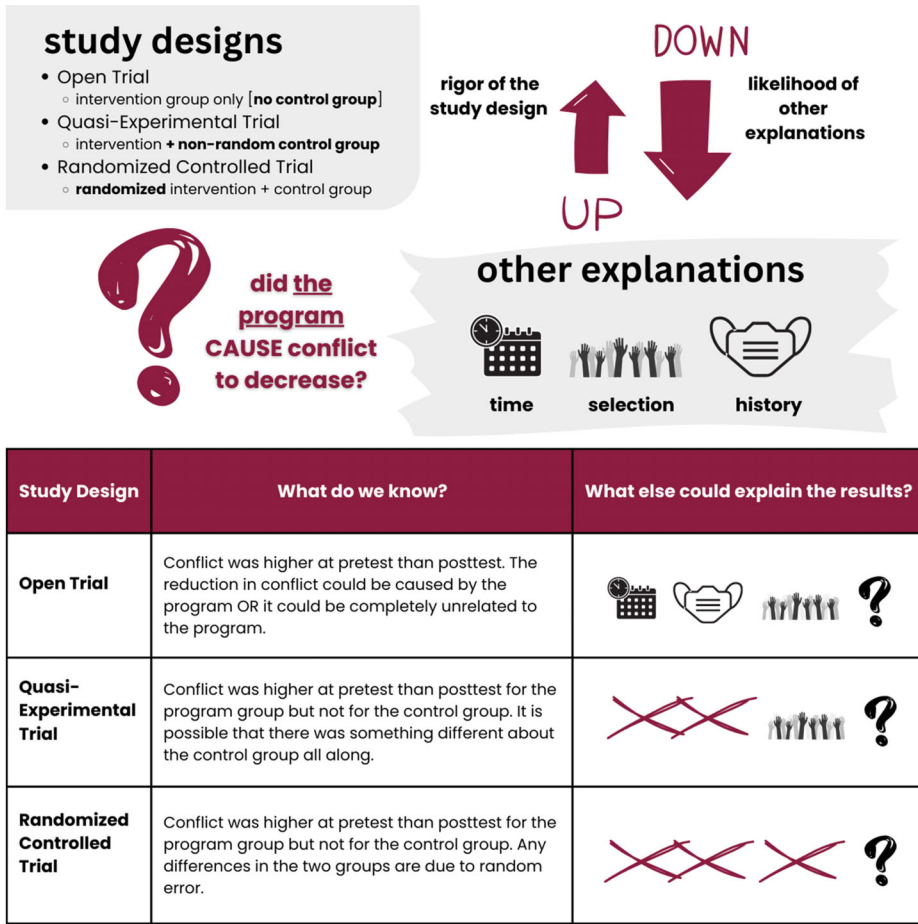


FIGURE 1 Schematic representation of study design features and corresponding interpretation of study results.

and the outcomes. In both cases, it is highly improbable that the observed improvements are due simply to the passage of time or unrelated events since such factors would have similarly impacted the control group or pre-intervention control condition (Mark & Reichardt, 2009). However, it is possible that pre-existing differences between the program and control groups account for any observed effects (such as social class, gender, or age, or other unknown and unmeasured factors). Because there is no element of randomization, the possibility of bias remains quite plausible.

In an experimental design, often called a randomized controlled trial (RCT), the added design element is the randomization (Shadish et al., 2002). A well conducted and well-analyzed RCT allows a strong inference that any observed effect is due to the program. It substantially reduces the risk of attributing the study results to extraneous variables by mitigating threats to internal validity, including timing, selection biases, and historical effects. Properly done randomization equates the program and comparison groups on pre-existing characteristics so that we can conclude, usually with a 95% or better probability, that the observed benefit (e.g., reduction in conflict) was caused by the program, rather than some other factor (Shadish et al., 2002). For this reason, an RCT is considered the gold standard for concluding with a high degree of confidence that the program being tested (e.g., parent education) affects an outcome (e.g., interparental conflict) more than the comparison condition (e.g., an alternative program or no

program). An RCT provides the strongest evidence of effectiveness. It is commonly used to assess the effects of medical procedures such as a new medication for cancer (Ritter, 2012) and is also appropriate to evaluate the effects of parent education.

APPLIED EXAMPLES: UNIVERSAL AND SELECTIVE ONLINE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Universal online parent education: Pima County Family Center of the Conciliation Court (FCCC)

In Pima County (Tucson) Arizona, within 45 days of the filing of a petition involving a minor child in an action for divorce, annulment, or legal separation and in certain paternity and post-decree actions, the parties must attend a mandatory parent education class. The class is mandated by A.R.S. §25-351 and is intended to help educate parents about the impact that divorce, family reorganization, and family litigation have on children and suggest ways to minimize the harmful effects on the children. The program includes information on court processes, common reactions and challenges that parents have, children's reactions and developmental needs, strategies for managing conflict, parental responsibilities, legal decision-making, parenting plans, and navigating new relationships. Since 2007, FCCC staff has delivered parent education classes to previously married/divorcing and never married/separating parents, in both English and Spanish, during the week, some evenings, and on weekends. More than 3700 parents participated in these in-person classes annually. In March 2020, classes were briefly suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption resulted in programming being offered virtually via Microsoft Teams, but only during court business hours, making it inefficient, and limiting access to justice for parents unable to attend during the weekday. In November 2020, the Arizona Superior Court in Pima County was awarded a Pandemic Response and Recovery grant from the State Justice Institute (SJI) to convert FCCC's parent education course to an on-demand, online, and self-paced e-Learning program. Grant funds were used to design, launch, and evaluate the e-Learning program and the process used to convert the course from an in-person format to an on-demand, virtual platform. The initial pilot phase (August–October 2021) involved 169 parents.

The goal of the Pima County Parent Education Program (PC-PEP) is to provide accessible information to the general population of separated/divorcing parents and to comply with state regulations. This includes increasing parents' awareness and knowledge of key issues and court processes. Evidence of statutory compliance is a content review of the program. Evidence of increased parent awareness and knowledge was obtained in an open trial through pre/post-program survey measures.

Theoretical and empirical foundation

The theoretical foundation of the PC-PEP is based on the didactic dissemination of information, with the belief that if parents are provided with the best available information, they will make informed decisions that serve the best interests of their children. The course incorporates existing research addressing the impact of divorce/separation, litigation, and the harmful effects of parental conflict on children and families. One program component provides information on the importance of participants separating their feelings toward the co-parent from their relationship with the child(ren). Other components address the importance of children having a safe and predictable relationship with both parents, distinguishing between helpful and harmful parental behaviors, and how ongoing co-parent conflict and domestic violence can be harmful to children and families. Parents are informed about the importance of continued access to maternal and paternal relatives, and given a better understanding of what the child may be experiencing.

Content

Beginning with education on the legal process, including court procedures, related terms, and alternatives to Court, parents are guided through the various content areas mandated by statute. Additionally, the content covers related research on the emotional process parents undergo before, during, and after divorce/separation. Children's reactions and needs are further addressed with reference made to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study (Felitti et al., 1998). Additional content highlights existing research concerning domestic/intimate partner violence, healthy co-parenting strategies, and safety-focused parenting plans. Parents are presented with information about children's reactions to the changes within the family at different developmental stages and the warning signs of children experiencing depression, anxiety, and risk to self-harm. Emphasis is placed on recognizing the impact of grief and loss related to changes occurring in the family and healthy coping strategies to consider. Information is also provided regarding state, regional, and local community resources to support individuals, and likewise, to improve and strengthen the relationship with the co-parent.

Instructional design

In total, nine modules each ending with a "check your understanding" interactive component and wrap-up segment are included in the course. See Table 2 for the topics and components of each module and their alignment with statutory requirements. Each module/lesson is listed on the left side of the screen. Participants must complete the

TABLE 2 Content addressed in PC-PEP aligned with A.R.S.§25–351(B): Parent education instructional and content requirements.

Pima County parent education program topic and components	Arizona revised statutes 25-351(B) requirement
What brought you to court	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources available to improve or strengthen marriage. Options available as alternatives to divorce.
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources available after divorce. Options available for mediation.
Court processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The legal process of divorce. Arizona family court procedures. Co-parenting notification requirements
Parents' reactions and parental challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The emotional, psychological, financial, physical, and other short-term and long-term effects of divorce on adults.
Children's reactions and developmental needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child development, research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The emotional, psychological, financial, physical, and other short-term and long-term effects of divorce on children. Children's reactions to divorce and separation at different developmental stages and warning signs of serious problems.
Strategies for managing conflict <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information on domestic violence, intimate partner violence, including statistical information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harmful effects on children from parental conflict, including domestic violence.
Parental responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Models for conflict resolution and healthy communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication and co-parenting skills. Helpful and harmful parent behaviors. Responsibility of parents to provide emotional support and financial support to children.
Legal decision-making and parenting plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including safety plan considerations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factors that contribute to healthy adjustment for children include the value of parenting plans.
Navigating new relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-parenting models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues surrounding continued access to maternal and paternal relatives.

modules in order and cannot move forward until they have completed each section. The program also includes voice and written narration, with the ability for the participant to slow down the speed of narration. The entire course can be completed in 2.5–3 h. However, participants may opt to work at their own pace, taking breaks and returning at a later time to complete. The course can be accessed via desktop, laptop computer, or tablet. Once completed, parents may refer back to course materials as a free resource during their court proceedings. The course is affordable, easily accessible, meeting Arizona statutory requirements for parent education programming. Parents with economic limitations may opt to file a request that the court defers or waive associated course fees.

Retention and compliance

The PC-PEP is online and interactive, requiring participants to complete an assessment with at least 80% accuracy to finish. Advancement through the material depends on the full playback of the audio segments. All parents are required to complete the course evaluation before receiving a Certificate of Completion. In Arizona, the course is a mandatory pre-requisite before participating in family mediation. As such, the course conveys useful information on options available for mediation, including legal decision-making and developing parenting plans.

Evaluation

An open trial design was used to pilot this program. The pilot trial included $N = 169$ parents who were enrolled in the online course between August 12th and October 14th, 2021. The course evaluation was built into the online program and parents were automatically directed to the evaluation questions upon successfully passing the end-of-course quiz (with 80% accuracy). Those who did not initially obtain a passing quiz grade were provided repeat opportunities to correct their errors by revisiting the applicable section(s) of the program, with ultimately 100% of participants passing the quiz indicating knowledge of program content.

Parents who opted into the pilot and completed the e-Learning course overwhelmingly rated their experiences positively. Results indicated that 87% found the class material personally relevant, 96% agreed that the material was easy to understand, 95% appreciated the convenience of completing modules on demand, 86% found the platform easy to navigate. In response to open-ended evaluation questions, parents noted that the course provided essential information, particularly regarding the divorce/separation process, the effects on children, the importance of a parenting plan, and strategies for successful co-parenting. In the end-of-course survey, more than 90% of parents identified the following course content as *most helpful*:

1. Understanding what children go through during a divorce (e.g., their emotions and perspectives, coping mechanisms, etc.).
2. Understanding actions that are harmful to children.
3. Explanation of the different parenting plans (e.g., co-parenting arrangements/models, boundaries).
4. Understanding court processes, procedures, and legal decision-making.
5. Learning more about the mediation process.
6. All were helpful.

State of evidence and next steps

The initial evaluation of this program provides strong evidence that the program is highly acceptable to parents. In addition, the online/self-paced program has been successfully delivered to over 3500 participants, indicating its

feasibility of delivery by the family court. It has gained statewide recognition throughout Arizona with designation by the AOC as the preferred format of course delivery. In January 2023, the English version was enhanced to address the needs of unmarried parents. As of May 2023, the program is offered in Spanish for both divorcing and unmarried parents. Thus, there is good evidence that it can meet the goals of the court including complying with state guidelines to provide mandated content of parent education in a scalable and accessible way.

The next steps may involve conducting another open trial to assess pre-post change in awareness and knowledge of specific issues to understand the extent to which the state-mandated content is being conveyed effectively. If researchers opt for a quasi-experimental or randomized design to compare the knowledge or awareness of a group of parents who received the program versus a group of parents who did not receive the program, the level of evidence would be strengthened. The court may also consider partnering with researchers to collect information on whether the program can influence other important outcomes, such as behavior change and child adjustment.

Selective online parent education: eNew Beginnings program (eNBP)

The eNew Beginnings Program (eNBP) is a six-module program that is designed to enhance parenting and reduce conflict skills for parents who are separated or divorced from their child(ren)'s other parent. The eNBP is based on the in-person New Beginnings Program which is the most extensively evaluated parenting after divorce program and has demonstrated through three randomized trials that divorced and separated mothers and fathers can learn to strengthen protective parenting skills that confer positive long-term benefits to their children's well-being, including decreased mental health problems (e.g. depression), lower substance use and abuse, less high-risk sexual behavior and lower levels of involvement in the criminal justice system (Herman et al., 2015; Sandler et al., 2018; Wolchik et al., 2016).

The eNBP is currently used in multiple court jurisdictions across the U.S. as an available resource for judges who believe a particular parent or set of parents requires a higher level of intervention than the state-mandated parent education course. The eNBP is primarily ordered by judges for the high-risk subgroup of parents who are experiencing elevated levels of interparental conflict, although it is also commercially available online for any parent who wishes to enroll. The goals of the eNBP center on demonstrable behavior change to protect children from the negative effects of interparental conflict and in turn, lower child problem outcomes. Evidence of effectiveness that matches these goals would be greater positive change on measures of the level of conflict, protective parenting, and child adjustment for parents who receive the eNBP as compared to those who received no program or an alternative program (Table 3).

Theoretical and empirical foundation

The eNBP is based on a theoretical model that reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors will prevent mental health problems in children who are experiencing the separation or divorce of their parents. The model embraces a person-environment transactional perspective, highlighting dynamic interactions between an individual and their social environment across time. This model suggests that changes in the social environment, like parenting, impact the development of an individual's competencies and problems, which in turn reciprocally affect the social environment and have cascading effects on future areas of development. The eNBP targets factors such as the quality of the parent-child relationship, and effective discipline, which prior research has found to be linked to better post-divorce adjustment in children, and interparental conflict, which has been reliably linked to worse post-divorce child adjustment (Amato, 1993; O'Hara et al., 2019).

There is extensive empirical evidence that the design of the eNBP can influence behavior change to protect children from the negative effects of parental separation and divorce. The program focuses on providing parents with

TABLE 3 Content addressed in eNBP aligned with A.R.S. §25-351(B): Parent education instructional and content requirements.

eNBP topic and components	A.R.S. 25-351(B) requirement
Not addressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources available to improve or strengthen marriage. Options available as alternatives to divorce. Resources available after divorce. Options available for mediation. The legal process of divorce. Arizona family court procedures. Co-parenting notification requirements Issues surrounding continued access to maternal and paternal relatives.
The divorce equation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The emotional, psychological, financial, physical, and other short-term and long-term effects of divorce on adults. The emotional, psychological, financial, physical, and other short-term and long-term effects of divorce on children. Children's reactions to divorce and separation at different developmental stages and warning signs of serious problems.
Protecting your children from conflict <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a protective shield Conflict check-up Respectful requests Reducing conflict <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turn down the heat Be prepared for conflict Get support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harmful effects on children from parental conflict, including domestic violence. Helpful and harmful parent behaviors.
Negative & positive family cycles Family fun time One-on-one time Catch 'em doing good Clear and realistic rules Good listening: The four talk to me's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication and co-parenting skills. Responsibility of parents to provide emotional support and financial support to children. Factors that contribute to healthy adjustment for children include the value of parenting plans.

skills to change underlying processes that are associated with problematic outcomes. One process is reducing children's exposure to interparental conflict. The eNBP employs specific strategies to decrease parent anger and increase parents' intent to protect their children from conflict and teaches skills (e.g., self-talk) to accomplish that goal. The program also offers conflict de-escalation strategies that had been used by the program that has the strongest empirical evidence of efficacy in reducing interparental conflict, the Dads for Life program (Braver et al., 2005; Cookston et al., 2007). A second protective process is increasing the quality of parenting provided by either parent. Although quality of parenting does not directly decrease conflict, research has found that for families identified by the court as having high conflict, quality of parenting by either parent was a protective factor associated with lower child mental health problems, even if the other parent had low parenting quality (Sandler et al., 2013).

Content

The eNBP consists of six online sessions of 30–40 min each that parents complete once per week. The content of these sessions is adapted from prior programs that have been found to reduce the level of interparental conflict

(Cookston et al., 2007) and protect the well-being of children in high conflict families (Sandler et al., 2013; Wolchik et al., 2007). Illustratively, program content designed to reduce interparental conflict describes a “protective shield,” which equips parents to anticipate conflict, focus on their intent to protect their children from conflict, and manage their anger. The protective shield has three elements. First, parents are taught to take a “protective stand” in which their goal is to protect their children from conflict. A second element is protective self-talk in which they remind themselves that they can stay in control by not “taking the bait” that leads to conflict escalation. The third element is to use their “protective words” to respond to the children's other parent in a way that keeps the focus on reducing conflict. The parents learn to use a planning tool, “My Conflict Check-up”, in which they prepare to use the protective shield elements to protect their children from anticipated conflict situations. The program also adopted conflict de-escalation strategies that had been successfully used to reduce interparental conflict in the Dads for Life program (Cookston et al., 2007). These strategies include talking in a way that shows respect, avoids sarcasm or put-downs, and treats the other parent as you would a customer or co-worker whom you need to get along with. Finally, parents are taught to use “respectful requests” with extended family or friends to avoid speaking poorly about the other parent in front of the child. Another set of skills adapted from the evidence-based in-person New Beginnings Program is designed to strengthen positive parenting (Wolchik et al., 2007). These skills involve creating positive and routine family interactions to build children's sense of security in the new family structure, listening to strengthen the parent-child bond and children's emotion regulation skills, and using effective discipline strategies so that parent-child conflict over rules can be avoided. Evaluation of the in-person New Beginnings Program found that the program's effect to promote positive parenting accounted for many of the program's positive impacts on children (Tein et al., 2004; Vélez et al., 2011; Wolchik et al., 2016).

Instructional design

The eNBP uses multiple design features to achieve its goals. A key feature for creating behavior change to reduce conflict and strengthen parenting is the use of home practice. After each of the six program sessions, parents are assigned an activity to practice the program skills during the following week. A week later, they engage in a *Home Practice Review*, where they rate how well their home practice went, what skills they used, and what problems came up in using the skill. For the weekly skill that did not go well, they are asked to rate what problems came up, and tailored for the specific problem they identify, they are shown a list of possible solutions that might work for them. Prior research has found that an emphasis on home practice with problem-solving of difficulties is key to having divorced and separated parents use the skills learned in the program (Berkel et al., 2016).

The eNBP is designed to be affordable, accessible, and engaging, making it scalable within the normal flow of the court system. The program is inexpensive with the option of being free for parents who cannot afford it. It is fully online and can be accessed by smartphone, computer, or tablet. The program text is written at a 5th-grade reading level to make it accessible to those with limited education. The program uses multiple approaches to make it engaging for parents. The dashboard lists each of the six program sessions and parents can track their progress through the six sessions. Each session is structured to begin with a review of home practice, a presentation of a new skill, interactive exercises in which parents test their knowledge of the skill, and a home practice assignment to use the skill with their family. Teaching each skill begins with a motivational activity describing why the skill is important, and including powerful parent testimonials describing how this skill has made a difference in their family. All skills are taught using a simple step-by-step approach, accompanied by a video modeling use of the skill. This is followed by an interactive activity in which parents are tested on how the skill will look in different family scenarios. For correct responses, they are given positive enthusiastic feedback to promote their feelings of efficacy. Incorrect responses are followed by a brief re-teaching of the correct use of the skill in that situation. At the end of each unit, parents are provided with resources including a downloadable handbook that includes everything that was taught in the unit and tip sheets on how to best use the skills in different families including younger and older children. They are also provided with each of the videos that model skill use.

Program retention and engagement

Not all parents who are referred to an online program do the program, even if they are mandated by the court. For example, less than half of parents who received a court order to complete an online parenting program accessed the website in one study (Tomlinson et al., 2023). The eNBP uses multiple evidence-based design features to retain parent participation in the program once they have enrolled. First, the program is personalized to the parents' own goals and commitments. Parents set their own goals for the program and assess their progress in meeting their goals. Second, parents set the times that they will practice program skills at home and receive e-mails and text messages reminding them. Third, parents also create their plans for dealing with problems in using program skills and receive an e-mail reminding them of the plan they created.

Engagement in the program is assessed in three ways. First, they cannot proceed in the program without responding to the interactive components. Thus, they must stay engaged in order to proceed through each session. Second, access to subsequent sessions becomes available 1 week after completing the previous one. This gated feature on the website ensures parents have ample time to practice newly learned skills before progressing, reinforcing the application of the program skills in their daily routines. Third, parents must score 80% or higher on a knowledge assessment quiz at the end of the program in order to receive a certificate to show the court that they have completed the program. For questions answered incorrectly, the program provides parents with a link to the program activity where the activity was taught and an opportunity to re-learn the material. As with all aspects of the eNBP, the emphasis is on building parents' efficacy in understanding and using skills that will protect their children from conflict.

Evaluation

The eNBP is an online adaptation of the in-person New Beginnings Program that has been evaluated in three randomized controlled trials (RCT), the gold standard for program evaluation for having confidence that the program caused the outcome that is assessed (Sandler et al., 2020; Wolchik et al., 1993, 2000). The NBP was found to have a significant impact on reducing problem outcomes for children following divorce up to 15 years later including reduced mental health and substance use problems, higher self-esteem, academic competence, and work functioning (Wolchik et al., 2002, 2013, 2020) and fewer days in jail and less use of mental health services 15 years following the program (Herman et al., 2015).

The eNBP was evaluated using an RCT ($N = 131$); divorced parents were randomly assigned to receive the eNBP immediately or to a wait-list control condition in which they received the program 12 weeks later (Wolchik et al., 2022). Both groups completed an online survey before random assignment (pre-test) and 12 weeks later, before the wait-list group was offered the program. In addition, 102 children ages 6–18 completed surveys. The surveys used reliable and valid measures to assess interparental conflict, quality of parenting, and child, and parent mental health problems. An important feature of this evaluation was that it included measures of both parents' and their children's reports of outcomes. The use of both parent and child reports of outcomes is important to address whether effects found from parents alone simply reflect their biased perception of the “right answer” after having done the program rather than a real difference in family processes. The results showed that the program led to a greater improvement in interparental conflict as reported by both parents and their children ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = 0.05$, $d = 0.36$ [parent report]; $\beta = -0.17$, $p = 0.02$, $d = 0.49$ [child report]). The program also produced positive changes in parenting as reported by both parents and children, including lower behaviors that assesses child rejection ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = 0.04$, $d = 0.44$ [child report]; $\beta = -0.37$, $p = 0.03$, $d = 0.58-0.68$, for those with lower baseline rejection) and higher use of effective discipline strategies ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.01$, $d = 0.41-0.47$ [parent report]; $\beta = 0.40$, $p = 0.01$, [child report, for those with lower baseline effective discipline]). Evidence was also found that eNBP reduced children's mental problems, particularly internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression

($\beta = -2.87$, $p = 0.005$, $d = 0.52$ [parent report]; $\beta = -3.21$, $p = 0.003$, $d = 0.59$ [child report]). In sum, the RCT found convincing evidence that the eNBP led to multiple benefits for separated/divorced families including reduced interparental conflict, increased positive parenting, and reduced child mental health problems. The study also found a high level of parent satisfaction with the program and 83% reported that they thought that courts should recommend the eNBP to parents (Wolchik et al., 2022).

State of evidence and next steps

The eNBP has strong evidence, demonstrated by an RCT, that the program caused a reduction in conflict, parent rejection, and child mental health problems. The next steps may involve assessing whether the program led to less relitigation or other indicators of the use of court resources and, assessing the external validity of program effects by studying whether the program works well for parents across race and ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or region. It will also be critical to assess the extent to which the eNBP aligns with court goals and explore the best way to disseminate the program to parents who can benefit from participating.

SUMMARY

This paper provides family law professionals with a structured approach to evaluating and selecting online parent education programs. By highlighting the critical role of specifying program goals based on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and outlining a framework with five key program features, we offer guidance on how jurisdictions can select programs that meet the specific needs of their courts. By leveraging the framework's emphasis on evidence of effectiveness, professionals can make data-informed decisions to endorse programs that have demonstrated success in improving goals that are important to the court, parents, and other stakeholders. We applied this framework to describe two distinct online parent education programs, showcasing their application in different contexts. The first program, offering research-informed guidance to all divorcing parents, showed acceptability and feasibility through an open trial. The second, the eNew Beginnings Program, demonstrated effectiveness to reduce interparental conflict, strengthen parenting, and reduced child mental health problems in a randomized trial. These programs, serving different needs yet achieving complementary goals, demonstrate the framework's utility for guiding program selection that is tailored to the goals and resources of courts serving divorcing and separating families.

Online parenting programs offer a promising approach for supporting families through separation and divorce, from providing accurate information about legal processes to protecting the well-being of children by mitigating conflict and fostering effective parenting while remaining scalable and affordable. They also provide exciting opportunities for family courts to accomplish multiple goals and serve the diverse needs of divorcing families and the courts. However, the path forward must include a standardized approach to enable courts to identify and select the most effective programs tailored to their jurisdiction's goals. A substantial evidence base already indicates that parenting programs can significantly benefit children in adverse circumstances (Sandler et al., 2011). To this end, we advocate for clarity and consensus within the family law community regarding the term 'evidence based.' Precise definitions and transparent reporting of evaluation outcomes, along with specifying the degree of evidence supporting a program's impact on specific outcomes that are valued by the court, are essential to guide informed decision-making.

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