



## Children of Divorce Intervention Program

A procedures manual for conducting support groups  
**SECOND & THIRD GRADE CHILDREN**

JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Ph.D. • Linda Alpert-Gillis, Ph.D. • Sharon Sterling, Ph.D.

*“This group has been a safe place where I could talk about things I’ve never told anyone before...It’s helped me to see that divorce is sad, but it’s not the end of the world for me or my family...”*

—PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

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STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND  
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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# Introduction

Over one million children each year in the United States experience the dissolution of their parents' marriage, marking the beginning of a series of life changes and adjustments ranging from emotional to economic.

Divorce is an enormously stressful process for families. Most children react initially with distress and, if given a choice, would vote a resounding “NO!” to their parents' breakup. For young children especially, divorce can be a confusing, frightening time, during which they feel little control over the many changes they face. These reactions are to be expected, but a number of studies, including our own, show that much can be done to prevent early reactions from becoming long-term problems.

The Children of Divorce Intervention Program was initially developed in 1982, based on an awareness of the stresses that parental divorce poses for children, and a belief that divorce does not inevitably have to mean long-term trauma for children. A number of studies show that how children fare in the aftermath of divorce depends in part on the amount of support they receive from significant adults in their lives, including those from their family and schools. The child's coping resources also play an important role in their potential for risk or resilience in the aftermath of divorce. Thus, CODIP was developed specifically to enhance children's capacity to cope effectively with the many changes and challenges they will face.

The program's two main goals are to:

- 1. Reduce the stress of parental divorce by providing a supportive group environment.**
- 2. Build competence by teaching specific skills that can help children cope with the many challenges posed by parental divorce.**

This program is based on a preventive intervention model. It is not intended for children with severe or chronic emotional difficulties that warrant more intensive treatment.

Four CODIP manuals have been developed for children of different ages: in kindergarten and 1st grade, 2nd and 3rd grades, 4th through 6th grades and 7th and 8th grades. While the goals and objectives embedded in these interventions remain relatively constant, the specific issues and technology vary according to the developmental differences of the age groups.

This curriculum was designed to address psychological reactions and developmental characteristics of 7- and 8-year-olds. Children of divorce, at this age, often react to parental divorce with intense sadness. Multiple fears, feelings of deprivation, fantasies of parental reconciliation, a sense of loss with regard to the family as it once was, anger, guilt and misconceptions are also common.

Developmentally relevant aspects of Wallerstein's (1983) concept of psychological tasks facing children of divorce are also reflected in the curriculum. Specifically, the six hierarchical, divorce-related coping tasks identified are:

- 1. Acknowledging the reality of the divorce and achieving a realistic cognitive understanding of it.**
- 2. Disengaging from parental conflict and resuming the child's agenda.**
- 3. Resolving the many losses that divorce imposes.**
- 4. Resolving problems of anger and self-blame.**
- 5. Accepting the permanence of divorce.**
- 6. Achieving realistic hope about one's future relationships.**

Mastering these sequenced tasks, starting at the time of the parental separation and continuing through late adolescence, enables the child to integrate the experience of parental divorce and to develop the capacity to trust and love in the future. To that end, the program emphasizes the importance of developing a supportive group environment in which these tasks are addressed and incorporated into intervention goals.

The program has four primary parts:

- 1. Feelings, families and family challenges.**
- 2. Coping skills: Learning how to handle feelings and problems.**
- 3. Child-parent relationships.**
- 4. Children's perceptions of themselves and their families.**

Although CODIP uses a variety of techniques, it is important to keep in mind that any single technique or approach is but one aspect of a more comprehensive effort to realize the larger goals of helping children express and understand their feelings and resolve personal problems. And beyond those objectives lies the program's ultimate and most important goal: to enhance children's adjustment.

This curriculum is intended as a guide for conducting a preventive intervention program, not group psychotherapy. Carefully controlled research has been conducted, providing an evidence base of CODIP's effectiveness. Results of those evaluation studies have shown significant improvements in children's home and school adjustment from the perspectives of parents, teachers, group leaders and the children themselves (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1989; Pedro-Carroll & Alpert-Gillis, 1987; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985, 1987; Pedro-Carroll, Cowen, Hightower & Guare, 1986; Sterling, 1986; Pedro-Carroll, Alpert-Gillis & Cowen, 1992; Pedro-Carroll & Alpert-Gillis, 1997). A follow-up study found that the improvements in adjustment experienced by children in the program were still in evidence two years later (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton & Wyman, 1999). In 1991, CODIP was the recipient of the National Mental Health Association's Lela Rowland Award for Exemplary Prevention Programs in the United States. In 2005, CODIP received the Program Excellence Award from the Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Based on converging evidence of the efficacy of this intervention, CODIP has been widely disseminated to others working with children of divorce.