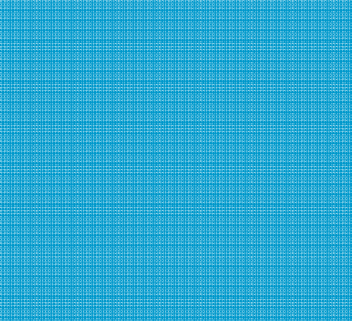


**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:  
A.C.T.\* FOR THE CHILDREN  
\*ASSISTING CHILDREN THROUGH TRANSITION**



JOANNE PEDRO-CARROLL, PH.D.  
MELISSA M. REYNOLDS, B.A.  
JUNE 2000

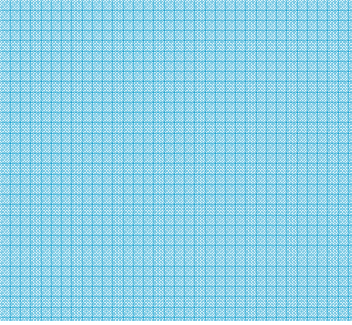


**children's institute**  
*Strengthening social and emotional health*

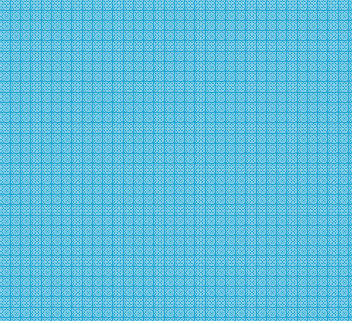


# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

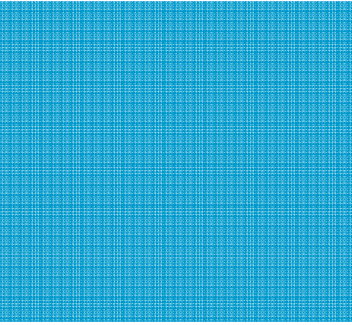
## A.C.T. FOR THE CHILDREN



Few life transitions entail as many profound changes as those that accompany separation and divorce. A break-up involves a myriad of changes, which are stressful for children, from emotional to economic, especially when intensified by on-going conflict between parents. All too often, children are innocent bystanders, casualties in divorce wars fueled by on-going hostility between parents and acrimonious legal battles. Longitudinal studies have documented an increased risk of adverse outcomes for children and adults. Indeed, across 37 studies involving 81,000 participants, it was found that children whose parents divorced evidenced a host of adverse effects, including poorer psychological adjustment, more behavior problems, higher utilization of mental health services as adults, and eventual disruption of their own marriages.



It is important to note, however, that these enduring, negative effects of a breakup are *NOT* inevitable. Many studies have identified protective factors that promote resilience and healthy adjustment in children over time. When those factors are incorporated into prevention programs that educate, support, and teach specific problem solving skills, there is evidence that healthy family functioning and thus, healthier children are the result.

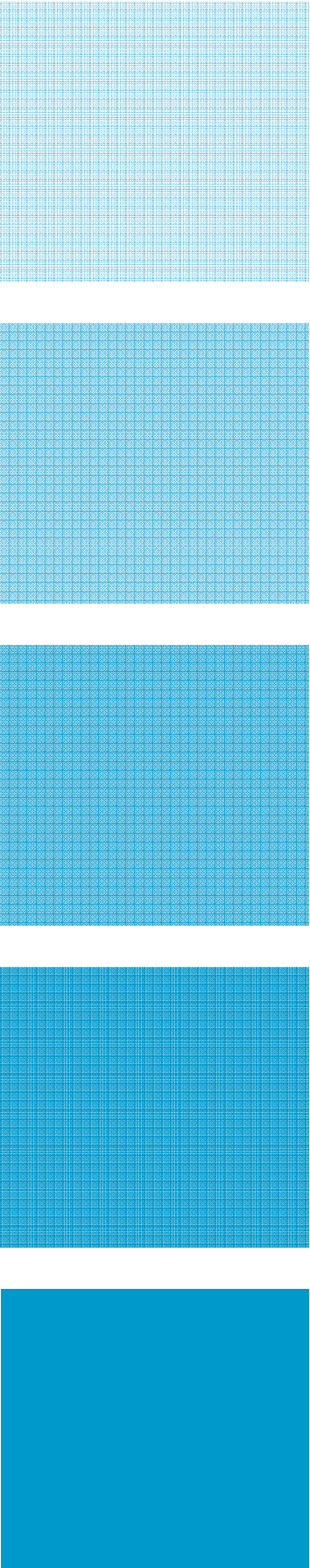


This report describes the results of a preventive intervention program for parents, A.C.T.\* - For the Children, which focuses on teaching parents skills to support their children, and to relate to their former partner in a businesslike way that reduces conflict. A.C.T.\* - For the Children is based on a risk and resilience model that seeks to help parents avoid the detrimental behaviors that increase children's vulnerability, and to teach parents best practices that promote resilience in children over time. The results reported here are part of a follow-up study assessing outcomes for participants at 6 months and one year after participating in the program. Statistically significant decreases in conflict between parents were found, especially on child-related issues, as well as more effective parenting practices, reduced litigation, and most importantly, increases in children's healthy adjustment.



## WHAT IS A.C.T.\* - FOR THE CHILDREN?

A.C.T.\* is an interdisciplinary prevention program that is a collaborative effort of the Children's Institute (formerly the Primary Mental Health Project, Inc.) at the University of Rochester and the Seventh Judicial District of New York, as well as the mental health, judicial, and mediation communities.



The program is centered on' a message of hope and empowerment that encourages parents to engage in behaviors that will promote their children's resilience and sound adjustment. To that end, A.C.T.\*- For the Children provides information about five topics: 1) children's developmental needs and emotional reactions; 2) the legal process; 3) the many ways in which parents can reduce the stress on their children, (e.g., by reducing conflict and keeping them out of the war zone); 4) strategies for renegotiating the parents' relationship and developing skills for effective communication, creative problem solving, anger control and conflict management; and 5) strengthening parent-child relationships and effective parenting practices for promoting healthy families and a positive relationship between the child and both parents.

A.C.T.\* - For the Children encourages participants' involvement through role plays that demonstrate techniques for renegotiating relationships from those of former spouses and lovers to that of business associates with a vested interest in their children. Specific skills for conflict reduction, effective communication, and creative problem solving are taught with a focus on protecting children from the toxic effects of ongoing hostilities and giving them the gift of a loving relationship with both parents. Presenters encourage parents to assume responsibility for creating a post-divorce environment in which their children are a top priority, while emphasizing that the program is not mediation or counseling, and not designed to give advice on specific cases or to resolve individual disputes.

Although A.C.T.\* - For the Children emphasizes that in most cases it is in the best interests of the children that parents engage in cooperative post-divorce parenting, it recognizes that it is not appropriate in all cases. Situations involving domestic violence and child abuse are referred to more appropriate services.

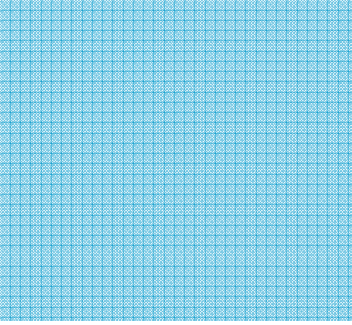
#### PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The program format consists of two separate 3 V2-hour sessions, scheduled one week apart. Two mental health professionals (psychologists, social workers, family therapists) with extensive experience with children and families are the core presenters and facilitate the program's skills training component. The legal component is conducted by a judge and a lawyer specializing in Family Law.

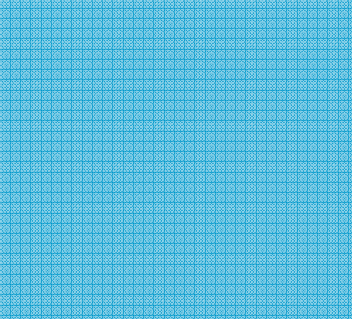
Skills training emphasizing the importance of protecting children from the toxic effects of ongoing conflict is the major focus of the program. Vignettes are shown from a video portraying ways in which children are caught in the middle of their parents' animosities. Participants are then engaged in problem solving more productive



ways of handling conflict - ridden situations involving children.



Although discussion of skills is helpful, actually practicing and applying them to real life scenarios is even more effective. Presenters first discuss ways of handling anger and conflict constructively, including communication skills such as active listening, "I" messages, paraphrasing the other person's statements, and clearly stating a proposal or suggestion rather than blaming or accusing. Parents are encouraged to renegotiate their relationships and see themselves as "business partners," who share the goal of enhancing their children's care, upbringing and well-being.



The program's skill development component teaches parents effective strategies for defusing conflict with their ex-spouse and for keeping children out of the middle of such conflicts. As an immediate outcome, most of the 775 parents who have participated in the program report at the conclusion their intentions to use these conflict-resolution skills. We needed to know, however, whether these stated good intentions would translate into positive behavior changes that would enhance their children's adjustment. Desired longer-term outcomes include decreasing children's exposure to conflict, improving parenting, strengthening parent-child relationships and reducing conflict with the ex-spouse; each of which is known to contribute to children's long-term adjustment.

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Note: Reference T95-428.1

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