



Children of Divorce Intervention Program

A procedures manual for conducting support groups
SEVENTH & EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS

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“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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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Curriculum Overview	7
Program Implementation	11
Session 1: Getting Acquainted	25
Session 2: Developing Group Trust: The Lifeline Exercise	29
Session 3: Sharing Experiences: “Tender Places”	35
Session 4: Understanding Divorce-Related Feelings	39
Session 5: Developing a “Group” Newsletter	45
Session 6: Developing Problem-Solving Skills	49
Session 7: Addressing Divorce Related Problems	57
Session 8: Learning to Communicate Effectively	63
Session 9: Dealing Effectively with Anger	71
Session 10: Resolving Conflict	77
Session 11: Understanding Families	81
Session 12: Panel of Experts on Family Changes	85
Session 13: Building Self-Esteem	89
Session 14: Saying “Goodbye”	93
Resource Guide	97
References	99

Introduction

Early adolescent children of divorce often feel a sense of shame and stigma when comparing themselves to peers from non-divorced families and frequently have difficulty appropriately expressing the resulting anger that they feel. In addition, adolescents are especially at-risk for having difficulties because the resolution of central issues to this developmental period, such as identity, trust, sexuality and intimacy, can be delayed by parental divorce. Parent-child relationships at this age can be especially vulnerable to disruption because adolescents are cognitively mature enough to understand the potential causes of the breakup and may express their anger and sadness by blaming one or both parents.

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 she 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 agenda of being a child.**
- 3. Resolving the many losses that divorce imposes.**
- 4. Resolving problems of anger and self-blame.**
- 5. Accepting the permanence of the divorce.**
- 6. Achieving realistic hope about one's future relationships.**

Mastering these tasks, starting at the time of the 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 addition, it has three major content components:

- 1. A focal affective component designed to help adolescents identify and express divorce-related feelings and share common experiences.**
- 2. A skill building component to teach group members ways to resolve interpersonal problems and to express anger appropriately.**
- 3. A final segment designed to enhance self-esteem, develop trusting relationships, and facilitate a smooth group termination.**

Although CODIP uses a variety of techniques to convey divorce-related issues and common reactions, 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 teens to express and understand their feelings and resolve personal problems. And, beyond those objectives lies the program's ultimate and most important goal: **to enhance adolescents' adjustment.**

This curriculum is intended as a guide for practitioners to conduct a group based preventive intervention for early adolescents. Each year that CODIP has been offered for children of different ages and sociodemographic backgrounds, a carefully controlled evaluation has been conducted to assess its effectiveness with different populations. Results of those studies (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Pedro-Carroll, Cowen, Hightower, & Guare, 1986; Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Pedro-Carroll, Alpert-Gillis & Cowen, 1992; Pedro-Carroll & Alpert-Gillis, 1997; Pedro-Carroll & Jones, 2005) have shown positive improvements in program participants judged from the perspectives of parents, teachers, group leaders and the children themselves. A two-year follow-up study found that those gains endured for program participants over time (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton & Wyman, 1998). Based on converging evidence of the effectiveness of this intervention, CODIP is being disseminated to communities nationally and internationally.

Four CODIP programs have been developed to date for children in grades K-1, 2-3, 4-6 and this one for early adolescents in grades 7 and 8. While the goals and objectives embedded in these interventions for children of divorce remain relatively constant, the specific issues and techniques vary according to the developmental differences of the age groups. A detailed description of the CODIP model, and research outcomes are summarized elsewhere and are available upon request (Pedro-Carroll, 1997).

This curriculum was designed to address psychological reactions specific to the developmental stage of early adolescence (12-14 year olds).

Common Reactions of Adolescents to Divorce

- **This age group tends to worry about what will happen to them. Because the breakup occurred at an age when the adolescent is preoccupied with concerns about being accepted and liked by peers, issues of trust in relationships can provoke anxiety.**
- **Sexual acting out may occur, particularly if there is increased visibility of the parents' sexuality and decreased limit setting or attention paid to the adolescent's behavior by the parents. The adolescent's feeling that the moral rules they have been taught have gone by the wayside can also lead to increased sexual behavior. This can be a problem when the adolescent is not emotionally ready for such relationships and is becoming involved in them as a reaction to family stresses.**
- **Mourning and a profound sense of loss are often felt by children in this age group, along with feelings of emptiness and fatigue. Adolescents may mourn the family of their childhood. They feel the loss in two ways: as a loss of the family that will no longer be available to them because one parent's leaving and as loss of the family they were leaving because they were growing up.**
- **Anger is a common feature, some being age-related and some serving to cover up feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. There is often anger at the parents for choosing to separate at this point in the adolescent's life.**

- **Changed perceptions of parents are not uncommon, with a parent being newly perceived as vulnerable and dependent or as strong and invulnerable. Moral judgments are often attached to these perceptions (i.e., vulnerability is bad). Adolescents who have perceived a flaw or fragility in one parent may exaggerate that perceived flaw and find that parent sinful, cruel, or self-serving and the other parent aggrieved, mistreated or martyred.**
- **Loyalty conflicts occur when one or both parents turn to their adolescent child for support in their relationship struggles. This often causes profound conflict for the adolescent over issues of allegiance and loyalty. The demands of parents to choose sides can lead to adolescent guilt, despair and depression.**
- **Greater maturity and moral growth can also be a consequence of parental separation. Adolescents tend to think about their parents' experiences and to draw conclusions for their own futures. Many attempt to learn from their parents' failures how to become better, more mature adults, and seek standards to guide their own behavior.**
- **Money concerns are often present in separating families and are a common battleground between separating parents. Adolescents can become prematurely "money-wise" and anxious about whether there will be enough money for their future needs, e.g., college expenses.**
- **Many adolescents experience a changed role in the family. Some move into protective and helpful roles, taking on the sharing of household responsibility and care of young children with competence and pride. Parents are sometimes able to depend on their adolescent children for very real added help, which can be a positive experience for the adolescent as well. It is important, however, that the adolescent have time and permission to live his or her own life apart from family responsibilities.**
- **Other adolescents respond to the family breakup by increasing distance from their parents. They become very active and stay away from home. Some of these adolescents have already been pulling away from their families and are more ready for independence. Others may maintain this**

separation, including a critical opinion of family members, for the most intense period of the crisis but, with time, may become more mellow and helpful. These adolescents are withdrawing from their parents' crisis and fighting in order to save themselves from being overwhelmed emotionally. This withdrawal from family can be an adaptive way of coping and retaining separateness from parental struggles.

- Temporary regressions are seen in this age group as well as in younger children. Adolescents may play with much younger children and spend more time at home. This is not a problem if it does not last too long (a few months). This behavior may become problematic and more entrenched if parents rely on the adolescent to care for them emotionally and encourage the adolescent to give up age-appropriate interests and activities in order to do so.

How Parents Can Help

- It is important for teenagers to have both of their parents involved in their lives and attending important events. Contact with the noncustodial parent may be difficult if the teenager has many competing interests, so a flexible schedule is important.
- This age group very much needs limits on behavior. Parents can become lax about the structure and limits that teens need, but this has the effect of making the teenager anxious and more likely to test limits. Parents need to work together and support each other.
- Since sexuality is a focus for adolescents, they need to be protected from being too aware of their parents' sexuality. When parents begin new relationships too quickly, and particularly if they become consumed by them or talk about the details to their teens, the teenagers often become confused.
- As with the other age groups, continuing to protect the child from awareness of parental conflict is important. Children of this age group may seem mature enough to be involved in the parental struggle; however, they are actually extremely vulnerable to blaming and rejecting a previously loved parent. Although this may be gratifying to the parent whose side the teen is on, it is not good for the teen's development.

Program Objectives

- 1. Provide a supportive group environment.**
- 2. Facilitate exploration and expression of divorce-related feelings.**
- 3. Develop skills to resolve problems and deal with anger.**
- 4. Disengage from parent conflict and refocus on adaptive pursuits.**
- 5. Enhance interpersonal competence and parent-child communication.**
- 6. Promote realistic hope for future relationships and enhance the capacity to trust.**
- 7. Promote positive self-esteem and foster smooth group termination with a maintenance of support.**