



Children of Divorce Intervention Program

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

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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

children’s
institute



STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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Curriculum Overview

The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) is a 15-session group intervention for 2nd and 3rd grade children. The program's overarching goal is to prevent or minimize the behavioral and emotional problems that children experience following parental divorce. To achieve this goal the program's structure and curriculum are based on five fundamental objectives.

- 1. Foster a supportive group environment.** Support is emphasized throughout the program. The group format itself is designed to provide children with much needed social support. Contacts with peers who have gone through comparable experiences can help children realize that they are not alone in their situation and that they are not different from other children.
- 2. Facilitate the identification and expression of divorce-related feelings.** Most people who are going through a major life transition find it difficult to understand and cope with all their feelings. Young children are vulnerable to being overwhelmed by stressful emotional experiences, because they lack the coping skills of older children and adults. Accordingly, the program seeks to enhance the children's ability to identify and label feelings in themselves and others and to learn to express feelings appropriately. Concepts such as "All feelings are okay" are developed as the group aims to provide a safe, supportive atmosphere in which all feelings are accepted.
- 3. Promote understanding of divorce-related concepts and encourage exploration and clarification of divorce-related misconceptions.** Helping children achieve a realistic understanding of what divorce does and does not mean is another important program objective. Children are often confused about their family situation. To minimize such confusion, the program develops concepts such as "divorce means that a child's parents decide not to live together anymore" and "divorce is a grown-up problem that is not the child's fault."

- 4. Teach relevant coping skills including social problem solving skills.** Another important program element is to provide children with skills that can help them cope better with the realistic challenges they face. Social problem solving teaches children how to think, not what to think. As children learn to generate alternative solutions and anticipate their consequences, they can cope more effectively with everyday problems. Such skills may be especially beneficial for children who must deal with the major stresses associated with parental divorce.
- 5. Enhance positive perceptions of self and families.** The program also emphasizes positive regard for self and one's family. Many children of divorce feel "different" or "defective" (e.g., "If I were only a better kid, my parents would have stayed together."). Thus, helping children to focus on their unique and special qualities is important. Family esteem, (e.g., awareness and acceptance of non-traditional family structures and the ability to see the positive family changes that have occurred since the parental separation) is stressed, as well as self-esteem.

These five objectives are addressed in a structured, sequential, detailed program curriculum. The curriculum has four primary units, with three to five 45-minute sessions each:

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

Each session includes goals, activities (e.g., stories, puppet play, interactive games), required materials, procedures and review questions. Brief abstracts of the four major units and the 15 sessions of the curriculum follow.

PART I: Feelings, Families and Family Changes

Sessions 1-4 focus on:

- **Introducing children to the support group.**
- **Establishing a safe, supportive, and consistent environment.**
- **Building children's emotional vocabulary.**
- **Clarifying basic feeling concepts.**
- **Defining and explore the concept of family.**
- **Introducing the topic of divorce.**
- **Exploring children's feelings about divorce in general.**

Session 1 seeks to establish the group as a safe, supportive place and clarify the purpose of the group. The latter includes helping children better understand divorce and handle feelings and problems that sometimes happen with divorce. Selecting a group name and introducing a group puppet, whose parents are also divorced, also help build cohesiveness.

Session 2 focuses on identifying feelings, developing a vocabulary of “feeling” words, and introducing feeling concepts such as the “universality” of emotions. Pictures of facial expressions and a feelings “grab bag game” are used to facilitate children’s understanding of feelings.

Session 3 deals with families, “something everyone has feelings about.” The idea that there are all kinds of families, each being unique and special, is emphasized through: (a) a book that promotes awareness and acceptance of non-traditional families; and (b) an exercise that helps children identify, reflect on, and share their own family situations, using family figures.

Session 4 begins to apply feeling words and feeling concepts to children’s divorce experiences. A book is used to describe children’s common reactions to divorce. The goal is to facilitate children’s awareness, expression, and acceptance of such divorce-related feelings. Common divorce concepts and misconceptions are also considered.

PART II: Coping Skills...Learning How to Handle Problems and Feelings

The general objectives of sessions 5-9 are:

- **Clarifying the concepts of “problem” and “solution.”**
- **Clarify the relationship between problems and feelings.**
- **Expand children’s coping abilities by teaching them the strategy of social problem solving.**

a) Teach children the basic social problem solving steps:

Identify the problem - “What is the problem?”

Generate alternative solutions - “What are all the things I could do?”

Anticipate the consequences - “What might happen next?”

Choose an alternative - “Choose what looks best and try it!”

b) Emphasize that there is more than one solution to any problem.

- **Help children learn to distinguish between problems they can and cannot solve.**
- **Encourage children to apply social problem solving to personal, divorce-related problems.**

Sessions 5-9 teach social problem solving skills that children can use to cope with “uncomfortable” feelings, and problems. Rather than telling children what to think, they are taught how to think when experiencing a problem. As children learn to think of alternative solutions and anticipate consequences of their behavior, they are better able to cope with daily obstacles. Research has shown that effective social problem solving skills are closely related to children’s self-confidence, good peer relationships, and overall positive adjustment.

Social problem solving skills may be especially beneficial for children who must cope with a highly stressful situation such as parental divorce. Children of divorce are often faced with difficult new problems that they are not prepared to handle. Teaching social problem solving skills is one way to prepare them to cope with such problems. Social problem solving skills can help children reduce the stress and confusion inherent in the divorce process, and help them gain control over aspects of a situation over which they originally had no control (i.e., the parents’ decision to separate/divorce).

The goals of these sessions are to teach children the four basic social problem solving steps and to apply them to personal divorce-related problems. The four basic social problem solving steps and corresponding “self-statements” are the following:

Problem Solving Steps	Self-Statement
1. Identify the problem.	“What is the problem?”
2. Generate alternative solutions to solve the problem.	“What are all the things I could do?”
3. Anticipate the consequences of a solution.	“What might happen next?”
4. Choose an alternative.	“Choose what looks best and try it!”

Although children learn all four social problem solving steps, two aspects of the process are emphasized in these sessions. The first is the generation of alternative solutions (i.e., Step 2). The ability to generate alternatives has been shown to relate more closely to children’s adjustment than any other step. Thus, one primary objective of the social problem solving sessions is to teach children to think of as many different solutions as possible for personal, divorce-related problems. Teaching children the difference between solvable and unsolvable problems is another important aspect of problem solving. Understanding that distinction relates to accurate anticipation of solution consequences. Problems that have negative consequences regardless of the number or type of solutions children try are “unsolvable.” Some divorce-related problems are “unsolvable” because children have no control or power over certain aspects of the divorce process (e.g., parents who fight or parents who decide to move). Teaching children to distinguish between divorce-related problems they can and cannot solve (i.e., control) minimizes feelings of frustration, self-blame, and confusion.

Children are given opportunities to develop and practice problem solving methods through diverse exercises and games. Increasingly, the new skills are applied to divorce related problems and feelings.

Session 5 introduces all four problem solving steps with an emphasis on generating alternatives. Children are asked to generate solutions to problem situations depicted in pictures. A point highlighted in the discussion is that there are usually many solutions to a problem.

Session 6 focuses on generating alternative solutions, anticipating consequences, and evaluating solutions. Choosing the best solution involves first anticipating and then evaluating possible consequences of each. A Tic Tac Toe game is used as a vehicle for practicing the four social problem solving steps.

Session 7 applies the social problem solving steps to divorce-related problems. Puppet plays by leaders and children are used to help group members apply these newly learned coping skills to typical divorce-related interpersonal problems of early latency children (e.g., fear of abandonment, loyalty conflicts, longing for the non-custodial parent). Leaders guide children in applying the problem solving steps to selected scenarios.

Session 8 teaches the distinction between problems that children can solve (e.g., wanting more friends) and cannot solve (e.g., feeling too tall). Children who understand and accept that some divorce-related problems are beyond their control feel less self-blame, frustration, and confusion. Children are encouraged to disengage from “unsolvable” problems and become more involved in age-appropriate activities. The Red-Light Green-Light game helps children learn to discriminate between their own solvable and unsolvable problems.

Session 9 reinforces children’s efforts to apply problem solving skills to their own problems through a problem solving “show-and-tell”, and, through an engaging board game. These promote consolidation of problem solving skills and concepts learned thus far.

PART III: Child-Parent Relationships

The general objectives of sessions 10-12 are:

- **Further explore children’s personal conceptions and feelings about divorce.**
- **Encourage children to express feelings about parents and parent child relationships and assist them in clarifying related issues.**
- **Assist children in applying social problem solving concepts to personal divorce-related problems.**

Sessions 10-12 continue to explore children’s feelings about divorce. These sessions focus on children’s relationships with their parents. Relevant divorce issues (e.g., loyalty conflicts, abandonment fears, reconciliation fantasies, feelings of rejection and loss), are highlighted. Further application of social problem solving skills to divorce-related problems is encouraged when applicable.

Session 10 explores children’s personal feelings about divorce through the use of a book and a question-and-answer activity. Feelings toward parents are emphasized. For example, leaders ask while reading the book: “When Niki got mad that her mother went out on a date, how did she show it? Is it okay to feel angry at your mother?”

Session 11 focuses on children’s perceptions and feelings about parent child issues through puppet play. Children are helped to understand their parents’ feelings, as well as their own. Problem solving skills are applied to the problem scenarios in the plays. The following is an example of a dilemma acted out and resolved by the children using problem solving skills: “Sam’s parents are divorced. His father is moving to another city. Sam is worried that if his father could move away and leave him maybe someday his mother might go away too. Sam is talking about his problem with his friends Mike and Chris.”

Session 12 uses a board game to review and consolidate important program concepts, and encourage further exploration of parent-related issues. Group termination is also introduced. Although children are initially told how many meetings there will be, termination becomes an important theme from this point on.

PART IV: Children's Perceptions of Themselves and Their Families

The general objectives of sessions 13-15 are:

- **Enhance children's self-esteem.**
- **Promote children's positive feelings about their families.**
- **Foster children's awareness of positive post-separation family changes.**
- **Explore termination issues and facilitate the working through of termination-related feelings.**
- **Encourage children to seek continued support from their environment.**

Sessions 13-15 deal with children's perceptions of themselves and their families.

Activities seek to enhance children's self-esteem and to develop awareness of positive family changes. The unit also emphasizes termination issues. The end of the group may reactivate feelings of loss related to those experienced around the family dissolution. The goal of the termination process is to facilitate working through this issue in a supportive group context.

Session 13 strives to enhance children's perceptions of themselves and others. Each child completes a booklet describing his/her characteristics, likes, feelings, wishes, and place in the group and family. Children complete sentences in ways that best describe how they think and feel. Termination is discussed in relation to items dealing with the group (e.g., "My favorite thing about the group has been _____."). Positive post-divorce experiences are discussed in relation to items dealing with the family (e.g., "Divorce can be hard on kids. Divorce can also make things better for kids and their families. One thing that is better now in my family is _____.").

Session 14 emphasizes children's special strengths as group members (e.g., being a good problem solver, being supportive). In the You're a Special Person game, members are first asked to list positive qualities of children. Next, papers with each person's name are circulated and group members write down the positive qualities that describe particular children. Children's and leaders' reactions to the ending of the group are explored further. Children are involved in planning a small party for the last group meeting.

Session 15, the final session, deals with children's experiences and feelings about the group. Children are encouraged to maintain relationships with fellow group members; others (e.g., parents, teachers, friends) to whom they can reach out for support are identified. The group ends with a celebration and children receive certificates of achievement in "Caring and Sharing."