



Children of Divorce Intervention Program

A procedures manual for conducting support groups
FOURTH–SIXTH GRADE CHILDREN

JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, 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

children’s
institute



STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Curriculum Overview	5
Program Implementation	9
Part I: Focus on Feelings	
Session 1: Getting to Know Each Other	17
Session 2: Understanding Changes in the Family	25
Session 3: Coping with Changes	29
Part II: Enhancing Coping Skills	
Session 4: Social Problem-Solving (Part I)	35
Session 5: Social Problem-Solving (Part II)	39
Session 6: Social Problem-Solving (Part III)	43
Session 7: Panel of Experts on Divorce	49
Session 8: Understanding and Dealing with Anger	53
Session 9: Dealing with Anger	57
Part III: Focus on Families, Self-Esteem and Ending the Group in a Positive Way	
Session 10: Focus on Families	61
Session 11: You're a Special Person Exercise	65
Session 12: Saying Goodbye	69
Bibliography	73
References	75

Curriculum Overview

PART I: Focus on Feelings

Sessions 1-3 comprise the program's focal affective component. The overarching goal of these sessions is to build support by providing children opportunities to share common divorce-related feelings and experiences. They also focus on clarifying children's common misconceptions about divorce, encouraging talking about divorce-related anxieties, and seeking to help children understand how this family change affects parents' feelings and behaviors. In Session 1, particular emphasis is placed on enhancing children's awareness and acceptance of diverse family structures.

Sessions 2 and 3 include DVDs, film clips, or books depicting the reality of divorce, the feelings it predisposes in children, reasons why adults separate, including issues of attribution and blame, and concerns about the future. These early sessions are designed to catalyze expression of divorce-related feelings and the sharing of common experiences. The goal is to reduce children's feelings of isolation, stigma, and sense of being different.

The following pages present detailed session by session outlines. However, groups can be as variable as individuals; techniques that work well with one group may be ineffective with another. The emotional issues of a group may indicate that the particular curriculum outline, or sequence, must be abandoned, or modified at a particular point. For example, if the session involves showing a DVD, and group members become involved in an emotional discussion of witnessing abusive or violent behavior of a parent, then leaders will want to modify the curriculum for that session to meet the needs of participants. There are numerous imaginative ways to achieve the goals indicated for a given session. The techniques suggested here are not the only ways to approach an issue, they are simply what we have found to be effective, and are offered as a beginning point.

PART II: Enhancing Coping Skills

Sessions 4-9 comprise the curriculum's **coping skills** component. Children of divorce often face vexing personal problems, some solvable, others beyond their control. Problems of inappropriate expression of anger and diminished impulse control are good examples. The next six CODIP sessions focus on that broad domain.

Social Problem-Solving (SPS) training seeks to teach children skills needed to cope with personal problems independently and creatively. Research has shown that social problem-solving skills relate positively to children's peer relations and overall adjustment. As children learn to identify and understand their feelings, think of a variety of solutions to personal problems and understand the consequences of those solutions, they become better equipped to deal with the special problems that parental divorce poses. SPS skills can thus help to reduce the stress and confusion inherent in marital disruption and enhance children's capacity to cope with that highly stressful situation.

Experience with CODIP to date suggests that the SPS component also facilitates supportive, cohesive group interactions. Children are eager to offer alternative solutions and feedback to their peers and are again comforted by the realization that they are not alone with their problems.

Sessions 4 and 5 focus on teaching children SPS skills that can be applied generally to personal problem-situations and specifically to divorce-related problems. Acquiring such coping skills is just as important as the benefits children derive from the group's supportive environment.

Children of divorce are often frustrated by a loss of control over the many changes in their lives. Impulsivity, aggression, anxiety, or withdrawal are common responses both to the frustration they feel and to the crisis they are experiencing. Interpersonal problem-solving training is an effective approach for children to learn to cope with those problems; it can help to replace the sense of helplessness or impulsive responses with a feeling of mastery and competence.

Session 6 seeks to teach children the critical distinction between problems they CAN and CANNOT solve. Many children reacting to feelings of helplessness become enmeshed in their parents' difficulties, and try to solve problems that are beyond their control. Session 6 emphasizes the difference between solvable and unsolvable problems, and offers recommendations for disengaging from unsolvable ones. Role playing and modeling of problem-solving approaches are used throughout these sessions.

Session 7 is intended as a dramatic but fun way to incorporate what has been learned thus far: to consolidate problem-solving skills. In that session group members take turns being a panel of "experts" on the topic of divorce - a much enjoyed and useful group exercise.

Anger is one of the most common reactions of latency-aged children to their parents' divorce. They are old enough to understand that divorce, unlike death, is not inevitable, and that their parents made a deliberate choice that resulted in many (often unhappy) changes and losses for them. Those realities precipitate feelings of anger. **Learning how to express anger appropriately is the main goal of Sessions 8 and 9.** The latter focuses on helping children to identify and understand the causes of anger and ways of expressing it appropriately using "I" statements. As in the problem-solving sessions, leaders should be involved actively and model healthy resolution of anger and other effective communication skills.

PART III: Focus on Families, Self-Esteem and Ending the Group Experience in a Positive Way

Sessions 10 seeks to help children understand the complex nature of family relationships, to promote acceptance of diverse family forms and to help children learn how to deal with family problems that are within their control and disengage from problems beyond their control. Children apply skills they have learned to family problems by participating in a stage-game (i.e., “Panel of Experts on Families”) structurally similar to Session 7’s panel, but with a focus on issues of life in a single-parent family, parental dating and remarriage and the challenges of blended families.

Session 11: “You’re a Special Person” exercise. This session’s two main objectives are to bolster participant’s self-esteem and to identify positive postdivorce changes. Leaders facilitate the discussion by highlighting the fact that although parental divorce is distressing and creates many family changes, some changes may be positive. This helps children identify sources of hope for the future that are often overlooked in the turmoil of marital disruption. An exercise is included to underscore children’s self-worth and highlight their special strengths. In this activity, all children receive written feedback from peers and leaders about their unique qualities and special contributions to the group. Children enjoy this exercise; some keep their “special person” card long after the group ends.

Session 12: Saying goodbye. This last meeting focuses on ending the group in a positive way. The group experience is reviewed with a focus on children’s feelings about its ending. Children are encouraged to identify and seek out people (e.g., parents, friends, teachers) who can provide support after the group ends. After 12 weeks of sharing and learning—and at times crying—together, children are open in talking about the group experience and their reactions to its ending. The following quote conveys their sense of the group experience: “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 my family or me.”