



# 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

children’s  
institute

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL AND  
EMOTIONAL HEALTH

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# Curriculum Overview

The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) is a 14-session group intervention for 7th-8th grade students. The program curriculum has four fundamental emphases:

- 1. Facilitating support.**
- 2. Establishing a climate in which important feelings can be examined and dealt with safely, and misconceptions clarified.**
- 3. Teaching situational relevant skills, such as interpersonal problem-solving and appropriate expression of anger.**
- 4. Enhancing self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. The program is a preventive, psychoeducational, supportive group intervention. It is not intensive group psychotherapy.**

**The overarching goal is to promote adolescents' resilience and healthy adjustment to family changes.**

The program's two main objectives are:

- 1. To reduce the stress of parental divorce by providing a supportive group environment in which to identify and share feelings associated with divorce, clarify common misconceptions, and reduce feelings of isolation.**
- 2. To build competence by teaching specific interpersonal skills (e.g., effective communication, interpersonal problem-solving, appropriate expression of anger) that help adolescents cope effectively with the many challenges posed by parental divorce.**

The following is a brief overview of each session:

**Session 1** seeks to establish the group as a safe, supportive place for members to share common feelings and experiences and to get to know one another. The purposes of the group are discussed including helping members to better understand divorce and related feelings, common problems and challenges. The issue of group confidentiality is discussed, journals are distributed to provide members opportunities to write about their feelings and experiences, and members complete a “Problem Checklist.”

**Session 2** focuses on developing trust among group members and leaders. Members begin to explore the feelings associated with each important event in their lives by creating individual lifelines. Common experiences are stressed to unite the group and create a caring and supportive atmosphere. Group leaders model sensitivity towards the feelings of others.

A major objective of **Session 3** is to continue to develop a supportive group atmosphere in which group members can share common feelings and experiences. Group members view the video, *Tender Places*, which focuses on an adolescent’s experience of parental divorce or an alternate DVD. Members are encouraged to concentrate on the feelings they had about their parents’ divorce. Common feelings and challenges are discussed and group members are encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives on family changes.

**Session 4** begins by discussing the video, *Tender Places*, viewed in the prior session. The fact is stressed that children’s feelings and emotions relating to their parents’ divorce are natural, expected reactions to such a major life change. The article “How to Survive Your Parents Divorce” is distributed and discussed. By reading about others’ divorce-related experiences, and by sharing their own experiences, members begin to increase social support and reduce feelings of isolation. The idea of a group newsletter is introduced. Members are encouraged to write down song lyrics that hold a special meaning for them to include in the newsletter.

**Session 5** focuses on relationships - that they are important to us all, and can be a source of support. Members are asked to share song lyrics that are meaningful to them for possible inclusion in a “Group” newsletter. Leaders emphasize significant relationship themes and describe the newsletter as a creative way for members to express their feelings. The idea of sharing the newsletter with individuals outside the group as a communication tool is discussed. Group members could also help other young people experiencing similar divorce-related issues by sharing their experiences.

**Session 6** focuses on the various personal challenges young people often face when their parents divorce. Social Problem Solving (SPS) training attempts to teach young people important skills that are necessary to cope creatively and independently with interpersonal problems. Research has shown that social problem-solving skills relate positively to children's peer relations and overall adjustment. As young people 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 tension and confusion inherent in marital disruption and enhance young people's capacity to cope with a highly stressful situation. SPS is an important coping skill that has been found to be an essential component of the CODIP program.

**Session 7's** primary goal is to differentiate between solvable and unsolvable problems. Members are asked to share problems and to discuss their solutions utilizing the six steps of social problem-solving. Group members are encouraged to disengage from divorce-related problems beyond their control and to recognize appropriate solutions to problems within their control. Members role-play problem-solving techniques.

**Session 8** reviews the differences between solvable and unsolvable problems, and reinforces when one should disengage from unsolvable dilemmas. Similarly, communication practices are presented as being either effective, or ineffective. The importance of clear communication and the ability to listen is emphasized in the "Telephone" game, the "One-way, Two-way" communication experiment, and a "Listening Skills" activity. To practice effective communication skills, it is suggested that members write a letter to someone for whom they have strong feelings.

**Session 9** begins by reviewing the importance of effective communication and how it affects outcomes. The feeling of anger, which is often felt by children experiencing parental divorce, is addressed. Members are encouraged to share anger provoking incidents in role-plays. They are asked to identify and evaluate alternatives in controlling and communicating anger. Leaders stress the benefits of productively expressing anger, as opposed to destructively expressing it. "I" and "You" statements are introduced.

**Session 10** begins with a review of effective ways of dealing with anger, and specific techniques for expressing anger in constructive ways. In this session, group members practice these skills in role-plays of common anger provoking scenarios. Group role plays help to consolidate and reinforce problem-solving, effective communication, and skills for dealing with anger effectively. Termination issues are also discussed.

**Session 11** focuses on understanding family relationships and provides an opportunity for group members to share feelings about their families. Members create a family tree, depicting their unique family structure, and discussion centers on both the changes that have occurred, and the strengths of their family. Group members are encouraged to bring up any remaining topics of concern or interest that have not yet been addressed.

**Session 12** provides an opportunity for members to consolidate coping skills and clarify misconceptions in a fun, engaging format as “Experts on Family Changes.” This activity helps to build a sense of mastery and self-esteem as members recognize that they have learned skills for dealing with family changes that can help others.

A major focus of **Session 13** is to help group members recognize their own unique strengths and reinforce a supportive bond among members. Leaders encourage group members to give each other feedback on the positive contributions made by each person. In a discussion of future relationships and members’ hopes for their future, leaders emphasize that how people manage inevitable conflict and anger has an impact on the success of the relationship.

**Session 14** culminates the group experience with a discussion of each person’s feelings and reactions to what they have learned and shared. Leaders encourage members to identify people in their own lives to whom they can turn for support. Each person receives a “memory book” with positive comments from everyone in the group about their unique strengths and group contributions.