



# Children of Divorce Intervention Program

A procedures manual for conducting support groups  
**KINDERGARTEN & FIRST 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) for kindergarten and 1st grade children is a 12-session preventive group intervention. The program's overarching goal is to 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 program goals:

- 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, acceptance, and appropriate 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 especially 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 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 OK" are developed as the group learns to provide a safe, supportive atmosphere in which all feelings are accepted and labeled.
- 3. Promote understanding of divorce-related concepts and encourage exploration and clarification of divorce-related misconceptions.** Helping children achieve a more realistic understanding of what divorce does and does not mean is another important program objective. Young children are often the most confused about their family situation. To clarify 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 and *not* children's fault."

**4. Teach relevant competencies such as communication and problem-solving skills.** Another important program element seeks to provide children with skills that can help them better cope 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 ask for help when they need it, they can come to cope more effectively with everyday problems. Such skills may be especially beneficial for children who must deal with the multiple changes associated with parental divorce.

**5. Enhance children's perceptions of themselves and their families.**

The program also emphasizes positive regard for one's 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, the ability to see the positive family changes that have occurred since the parental separation) is emphasized, as well as *self*-esteem.

These five goals are addressed in a structured, sequential, detailed program curriculum.

The curriculum has four primary units, with three 45-minute sessions each:

- 1. Establishing the group and learning about feelings.**
- 2. Understanding family changes.**
- 3. Developing coping skills.**
- 4. Enhancing self-esteem and maintaining support.**

The curriculum includes the following information for each session:

(a) goals; (b) activities (e.g., stories, puppet play, interactive games); (c) materials required; (d) procedure; and (e) review questions. Brief abstracts of the four major units and the 12 sessions of the curriculum follow.

## **PART I: Establishing the Group and Learning About Feelings**

### **SESSION 1: Getting to Know Each Other**

Session 1 focuses on establishing a safe, supportive group environment for all group members. It introduces the purpose and structure of the group and sets the stage for future sessions.

### **SESSIONS 2 and 3: All About Feelings**

Sessions 2 and 3 focus on expanding the child's emotional vocabulary, introducing feeling concepts (e.g., all feelings are acceptable) and promoting communication skills.

## **Part II: Family Changes**

### **SESSION 4: My Family**

Session 4 deals with families. Children are helped to explore how all families share things in common and yet how each one is also unique. Children address their feelings about their families.

### **SESSION 5: Divorce is a Grown-Up Problem**

Session 5 focuses on divorce – what it does and does not mean. The challenges of families in transition are addressed, experiences shared and misconceptions clarified all within a supportive group environment.

### **SESSION 6: Understanding Family Changes**

Session 6 further focuses on children's experiences of living in a divorced family situation. In this context another communication skill is introduced. Children further develop their ability to ask others for assistance, clarification, information and support.

## **Part III: Developing Coping Skills**

### **SESSIONS 7, 8 and 9: Learning How to Solve Problems**

Sessions 7 and 8 focus on teaching children coping skills. In Session 7, children are taught to “stop and think” of multiple solutions when faced with a problem. In Session 8, puppet plays are used to help children learn the problem-solving steps and to help them begin to apply these skills to personal problems. In session 9, leaders help children develop the important skill of differentiating between problems they can and cannot solve.

## **Part IV: Enhancing Self-Esteem and Maintaining Support**

### **SESSION 10: Consolidating Skills: The Daring Dinosaurs Game**

Session 10 serves as a review session. Key program concepts and skills are emphasized in the Daring Dinosaurs game. Self-esteem issues are also addressed. Termination issues are introduced in this session and play a major role in the following two sessions as well.

### **SESSION 11: I Am Special**

This session focuses on promoting each child’s self-esteem. Although this has been addressed throughout the program, Session 11 emphasizes each child’s special and unique qualities. Also a focus in Session 11 is the uniqueness of each child’s family. Again, termination issues are also an important topic.

### **SESSION 12: Saying Good-Byes**

Session 12, the final session of the program, reviews the children’s experiences in the group. The special qualities of the group and each member are emphasized. Ways for the children to stay in touch with one another and the group leaders are discussed. Children are also helped to identify other supportive adults to whom they could turn if they had a problem. Finally, the group celebrates with a “graduation” party and a certificate is distributed to each child.