

No cookie-cutter divorces, so what info should online co-parenting classes offer?

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Required online classes for divorcing couples who have children are good at teaching parents how to deal with children's needs and responses to their family's new situation. But co-parenting couples would benefit from content that helps adults cope with their own emotions and from unique tracks for families with special circumstances such as intimate partner violence or alcoholism, said a University of Illinois researcher in human and community development.

"There is no cookie-cutter divorcing couple, and with online programming, educators are able to supply content that applies to diverse family situations," said lead author Jill Bowers who began evaluating online divorce education courses in 2011.

"Program developers could create a two-hour core component that would apply to many divorcing or separating couples with [children](#); then parents could have the option of choosing other topics based on their interests, or results of a pre-test could direct parents to further hours of programming based on their unique needs," she added. Bowers' new study reviews data from 1,543 participants in an online course whose creator solicited the researcher's feedback.

The researcher said that at least 46 states require from two to six hours of co-parenting classes before a divorce is granted to couples who have children under 18 years old.

"Divorcing parents must pay for these classes, which used to involve

classroom instruction. In the past decade, however, course selection has expanded to include many online offerings, and that's created a market for online program developers and educators," she said.

When evaluating a course, Bowers assesses whether course content is research based.

"An online search for parenting after divorce generates millions of results, but that doesn't mean the answers you'll find are from credible or reliable sources. I believe it's important for online educators to cite their courses and explicitly talk about their conceptual foundations so audiences can distinguish credible sources from self-proclaimed experts. Then judges and parents should look for programs that are scientifically grounded in divorce, child development, relationships, and communication literature," she noted.

Although experts recommend an eighth grade reading level for such programs, materials Bowers has reviewed sometimes test out at grade 13. She suggests that educators could highlight words and direct parents who are less experienced readers or who have a limited vocabulary to a resources page that includes definitions of difficult terms.

Most online programs focus on communication with the child and the co-parent, and they generally do well at helping parents to think about children's reactions to divorce at different ages, the impact of one parent "bad-mouthing" another, and strategies for helping kids deal with their new reality.

"But adult-focused content could be enhanced. For example, research shows that parents who have not had time to grieve the loss of the relationship may experience emotional issues, and because of their grief or anger, they may be unable to help their children cope. Programs could be improved by adding content that helps parents address their emotional

needs so they would be better equipped to help their children through the transition period. We'd also like to see strategies that parents can use when conflict is escalating," she said.

Because parents take these classes between filing for and obtaining a divorce, online [educators](#) don't often cover such issues as introducing a new partner to children, sex and cohabitation, remarriage, and blended families, even though some couples are dealing with these topics at that time. Discussion of these subjects could be useful, she said.

According to Bowers, the court system that divorcing parents encounter as well as the legal process is often unfamiliar and overwhelming. She noted that online programs do well with covering financial obligations, child support, and parenting plans, but other legal terms and processes, including the value of mediation, should also be considered in programming for parents.

"The companies that have developed these programs appear to be very committed to helping families. The ones we have worked with have been especially responsive to our evaluations. We know that divorce is a really tough time for families, and we hope that these suggestions for adapting course content and design of mandated co-parenting classes can not only make a difficult and often traumatic experience easier but that it can also optimize outcomes for [parents](#) and children going through this process," she said.

More information: Bowers, Brian G. Ogolsky, Robert Hughes Jr., and Jeremy B. Kanter are co-authors of "Coparenting Through Divorce or Separation: A Review of an Online Program," which appears in a recent issue of the *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*. It can be viewed online at www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10502556.2014.931760

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