

Online parenting skills program shields children from adverse effects of divorce

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Close to half of all marriages in the US end in divorce, affecting over 1 million children each year.

These children are at an increased risk of struggling in school, experiencing mental health or substance use problems and engaging in risky sexual behavior. A new study from the Arizona State University Department of Psychology has shown that an online parenting skills program for divorcing or separating [parents](#) reduces interparental conflict, improves quality of parenting and decreases children's anxiety and depression symptoms.

"Most children bounce back after divorce, but anywhere between 25-33% of children have significant problems, including academic challenges, [mental health problems](#), risky sexual behavior and substance use," said Sharlene Wolchik, professor of psychology at ASU and first author on the paper. "We showed that the online eNew Beginnings Program, which is based on 30 years of research into factors that help kids after divorce, benefits these children."

The researchers, led by Wolchik and Irwin Sandler, Regents' Professor of psychology emeritus at ASU, adapted an in-person parenting skills program to be web-based and asynchronous, which meant parents could complete training sessions whenever they wanted and even on their phones. The effectiveness of the eNew Beginnings Program was tested in a [randomized controlled trial](#) that included 131 participants who were randomly given access to the program or assigned to a waitlist. The findings will be published in *Family Court Review*.

"Many divorcing parents are concerned about their children and might be frightened by the statistics they read that their children are at increased risk for negative outcomes. This study provides the strongest evidence to date of the positive impact of an online program for divorcing and separating parents," Sandler said. "Family court judges can use it as a tool to protect the well-being of children and to help parents through the process."

The eNew Beginnings Program consists of 10 sessions that focus on parenting quality and interparental conflict, which directly contribute to [mental health](#) problems in children after divorce or separation.

To test how well the program worked, the study used evaluations from both parents enrolled in the course and their children. Parents and [children](#) reported that the course improved parenting quality and reduced anxiety and depression symptoms in kids. Both also reported reduced conflict between parents. The size of the reduction in interparental conflict was greater for the online program than the in-person version.

"We were surprised that the effects of the online program were stronger than the in-person program," Wolchik said. "The eNew Beginnings Program was designed to be highly interactive and engaging in its focus on teaching parents how to identify obstacles to practicing the skills they learn, which is a key part of the program."

The online program also had a better completion rate than the in-person version, likely because the asynchronous format allowed participants to pause and come back at any time. Among those participants who completed the first session, 16% finished the in-person version, but 60% finished the eNew Beginnings Program.

"That completion rate is unusual for programs like this," Sandler said. "The eNew Beginnings Program was designed to be accessible, and more than half of the participants completed the sessions on their smart phone."

Wolchik and Sandler have been working for years to expand access to the eNew Beginnings Program because they know it works. The in-person program is expensive—they estimate it costs approximately \$700 per family—and the combination of having to train facilitators with the scheduling constraints of parents who are balancing work and childcare

likely contributed to the low program completion rate.

"We have been working for a long time to disseminate this program and our frustration with the expense and other hurdles is what led us to turn to the web," Sandler said. "We are thrilled that the eNew Beginnings Program works just as well."

Over 80% of the participants said that family courts should recommend divorcing or separating parents complete the eNew Beginnings Program.

More information: Sharlene A. Wolchik et al, Effects of an asynchronous, fully web-based parenting-after-divorce program to reduce interparental conflict, increase quality of parenting and reduce children's post-divorce behavior problems, *Family Court Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/fcre.12620](https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12620)

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