Lecturer develops digital mental health program for children of divorce

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As a child of divorce, Jesse L. Boring knew firsthand what it was like to go through, and the importance of providing accessible resources for children experiencing this life change. To that end, Boring created a program named [Children of Divorce—Coping with Divorce (CoD-CoD)](link) to help youth develop better coping skills through their parents' separation.

"I knew I had some of the experiences that were relevant to what other kids might be experiencing, and I thought it was really important to include not just hypothetical stories, but authentic stories—[personal stories](link) about things that really happened," said Boring, a lecturer in the Psychology Department at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

The program consists of interactive learning modules paired with mini-games and videos. As a personalized and interactive digital program, Boring hopes to reach as many children as possible with the program.

The goal of CoD-CoD's is to decrease internalizing problems like symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing problems such as acting out in classrooms and other behavioral issues. To connect with these adolescents, CoD-CoD takes a special approach.

Jesse L. Boring, a lecturer in the Psychology Department at Binghamton University, has created a digital mental health program to help children cope with divorce. Image Credit: Jonathan Cohen. / Binghamton University, State University of New York

"Especially for adolescents, I think they are really sensitive to media that feels too pandering and impersonal and scripted. And so I wanted to do something different," Boring said. "I wanted to take advantage of the possibility to make it more personal by including people from my life, my real experiences, and real situations I had experienced."

One example of increasing entertainment and personalization for the children includes a video, placed between the program's activity modules, of Boring's brother, dumping a bucket of water on him, right

before he jumps into a freezing lake. Videos like this help to maintain higher retention and interest in the program with its comedic effect.

Boring's program has recently been certified as a Promising Program by Blueprints Programs for Healthy Youth Development for its evidence-based research, establishing it as an effective tool for decreasing mental health problems in youth.

"The Blueprints Program is one of the most well-respected registries of evidence-based programs. Having CoD-CoD be certified as a Promising Program gives it credibility as mental health care. I think one of the big barriers with digital programs is that many people are still not recognizing digital programs as real health care, as real support," Boring said.

Boring is also working alongside Irwin Sandler, a research professor at the REACH Institute at Arizona State University, on a digital version of Sandler's in-person Family Bereavement Program for bereaved adolescents. They have recently submitted a research proposal for a grant to fund the expansion of the program's reach.

"The Family Bereavement program, 15 years later, still has effects on the kids that went through the program, and those effects are related to improvements in coping that occurred when they originally took the program," Boring said.

"It's another chance to take on a program that I would love to see in widespread use throughout the community. I think it's a beautiful program, where you don't need to have access to specialized training; you can just have it available online so that anybody who wants to access it can access it."

Before joining the Psychology Department, Boring spent six years

working for SUNY Broome Community College.

"I really fell in love with teaching. But after a while, I missed the research side of things and the greater opportunities that a four-year research-intensive university like Binghamton could provide. And so, I applied here. It's just a really interesting process. I love being part of that intellectual pursuit of 'How do we make a program that's as good as possible?'" Boring said.

The collaborative efforts of graduate and undergraduate students are an important part of Boring's research.

"I had a student who worked with me on my research last semester and it was just really nice. If we get that grant, I'll start a lab and that will be a fun and entertaining and enlivening opportunity to be able to mentor people who are learning how to conduct research."

Boring is uncovering some of the largely untapped potential of digitizing mental health programs, and he suspects the future will continue to embrace the digital world.

"I feel very confident in saying digital mental health will become more and more a part of the typical mental health landscape," Boring said. "I think people will get more comfortable with the idea that the digital resources out there are relevant to them."

For Boring, the potential of digital mental health programs is infinite.

"My dream program is to make a universal coping program for suicide prevention in youth," he said.

"The idea would be that it could be something schools use across the nation to teach basic coping skills, like using active coping, reducing

avoidant coping, enhancing coping efficacy. Those are things that are good for anybody in the whole population, and you could apply it broadly and potentially have a nationwide impact."

Provided by Binghamton University