



An Evaluation Study of the Overcoming Barriers Family Camp

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Background

Empirical research reports that children of divorce show better overall functioning, psychological adjustment and long term well being when they maintain close emotional bonds, frequent contact and quality relationships with both parents (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Pruett, Cowan, Cowan & Diamond, 2012).

In the past decade, family courts have seen a significant increase in the number of parent-child contact problems and allegations of unjustified rejection of a parent post-separation (Bala, Hunt & McCarney, 2010).

Prevalence rates of children who resist or refuse contact with a parent remain unclear and vary depending on operational definition and sampling strategy (Saini, Johnston, Fidler & Bala, 2012).

Children who resist or refuse contact with a parent post separation or divorce represent one of the greatest challenges for parents, legal and mental health professionals and the court. Professionals are challenged with how to appropriately assess, manage and treat these complex cases (Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2013).

Reunification therapy is a specialized therapeutic intervention often recommended or court ordered when contact issues emerge. It aims to:

- Improve a child’s psychological health;
- Improve family functioning by restoring parenting, co-parenting and parent-child roles;
- Improve communication patterns and conflict resolution skills;
- Address cognitive distortions in perceptions and judgments and;
- Help ameliorate a child’s relationship with both parents (Johnston, 2005; Johnston, Walters & Friedlander, 2001; Fidler et al., 2013; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2010; Warshak, 2010).

Overcoming Barriers Family Camp

Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (OBFC) is a five-day/four overnight family camp experience held in upstate Vermont.

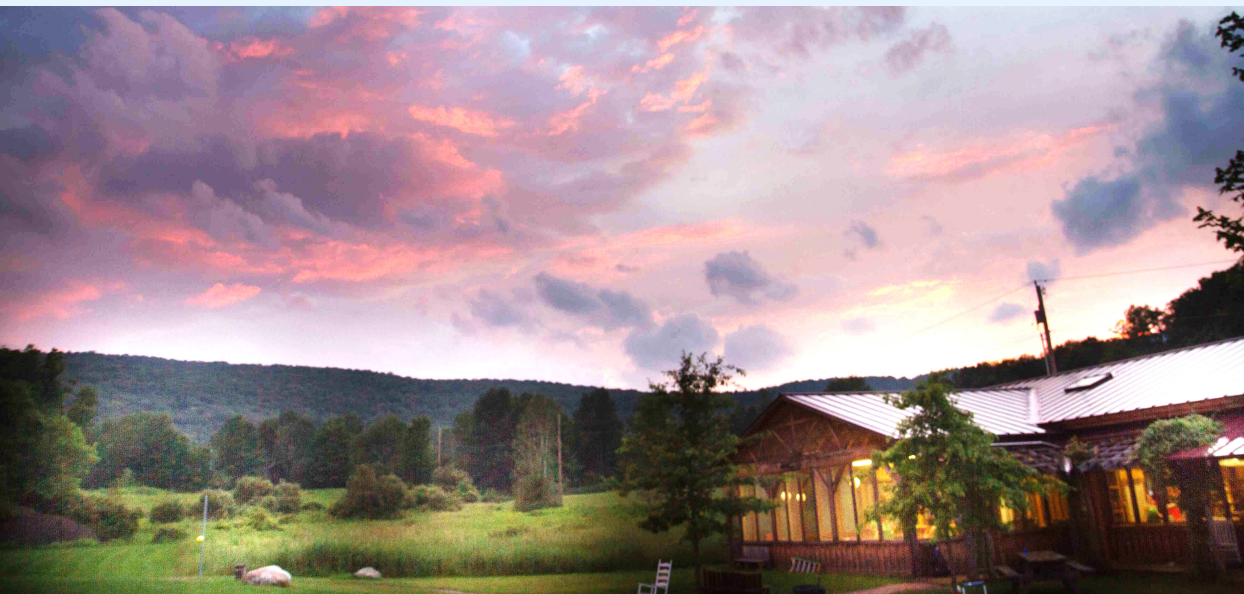


The program delivers intensive treatment for high conflict families where children resist or refuse contact with a parent.

OBFC is led by experienced MHP’s, camp directors and counselors.

Treatment includes the combination of:

1. Psycho-education
2. Clinical interventions using different family combinations
3. An enjoyable camp experience



Dining Hall: Common Ground Center

OBFC Logic Model

LOGIC MODEL: OVERCOMING BARRIERS FAMILY CAMP							
Program Plan				Outcome Plan			Measurement
Target Group	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcome Statements			Measurement
	Resources, budget lines	Activities, tasks and strategies	Deliverables	Short-Term	Mid-Term	Long-Term	Design
All members of restructured family system (parents, spouses, and stepiblings) Evidence of strained parent-child relations. Court ordered	Funding -Private funding Facilitators Expert mental health professionals providing pre-bone services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intake as a process to begin set up work with families• Screening for issues of abuse and safety and initial work with the entire family• Program (may include: a) 5-day, 4-overnight family camp program; b) weekend intensive; c) one day follow up(a) Psycho-education(b) Intensive clinical(c) Strategic use of activities to engage(d) Enjoyable camp experience(e) Role plays(f) Aftercare activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Referrals # of participants # of family members/children• Dosage / Intensity # of hours in each program component• Timing of intervention within court process• Full or partial Parenting plans and/or agreement• # of aftercare referrals• Consultation for after care (courts, PC, therapist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overall satisfaction with camp experience• Child Safe interaction with reject parent• Children see (or hear about) both parents working in a safe way• Children to become desensitized to RP• Child and parent increased knowledge of communication, problem solving, & emotional strategies• Parents' knowledge of impact on conflict on children• Parents' increased knowledge of factors for strained parent-child relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Child's decreased feelings of fear, anger, anxieties towards RP• More child focused plans regarding parenting decisions• Reduced polarized views of parenting• More realistic views of parenting plans• Improved parent-child relationships• Decreased parental conflict• Decreased parent-child conflict• Improved parenting skills• Improved parent alliance and working relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved well-being for children• Improved wellbeing for FP and RP• Improved family functioning• Agreement about a shared parenting plan• Decreased litigation	Mixed method design: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepost group surveys• Qualitative interviews• Fidelity checklist• Administrative data analysis• Post group evaluation• Follow up

Purpose of Evaluation

In July of 2013, a formal evaluation was completed to determine:

- OBFC’s implementation relative to the program objectives.
- The experiences and outcomes of children and families who have participated in the program.
- Clients' satisfaction of the program and overall camp experience.

Methodology

- All camp participants were invited to take part in the evaluation.
- A mixed methods evaluation including a pre-experimental pre-post test within group design and qualitative interviews.
 - Parents individually completed pre and post anonymous online surveys via Fluidsurvey.
- Qualitative interviews were conducted with all camp participants on the last day by a third party independent evaluation team.

Demographics

- 5 families participated in the camp.
- 5 fathers and mothers completed pre-post test surveys.
- All parent dyads were previously married.
- 100% of parties report no intentions of reconciling with the other parent.
- In this group, fathers were the rejected parents in the sample.
- 11 children participated in the interviews.
- Children ranged in ages from 10 to 17 years of age.

Parents’ Reasons for Attending OBFC

- Improve interparental communication and find “common ground”
- Reduce level of conflict between parents.
- Facilitate “a relationship with a child who has totally rejected one parent”.
- Provide education on effects of alienation on both parent and children
- Keep parents child-focused.
- Have an independent, third party observe parent-child interactions.
- Provide their children with skills to cope with the separation, meet other children in the same situation, and allow them to feel “better supported” throughout the divorce process.

“I hope it will allow the children to establish some independence from their mother. I hope it will enable them to tell her to say “stop it!” when their mother tells them terrible things about me.”

Parents’ Qualitative Impressions

Qualitative interviews revealed most parents were satisfied with the professionalism encountered among camp staff and the mutual support received by other participants:

- *“I believe that things can get better if both myself and my co-parent use some of the skills that we have learned and continue to work with professionals in the near future.”*
- *“I felt safe and comfortable in the program”*
- *“I felt like, when the kids had a problem, there were competent staff available, that when they came to me, I could hand them off and their voices would be heard. This might be a counselor who would give them emotional support or a therapist.”*

In several cases parents relied on each other for support which assisted them in moving forward in with their own challenges with their family situation.

Others felt the lack of privacy was problematic:

- “Lack of privacy and being placed in the company of women who I liked, but were also who were bitter and entrenched in the divorce process. Many times I just ached to get away and talk about something positive.”*

Some parents reported concerns of the lack of opportunity to interact with their children.

Participants Overall Goals

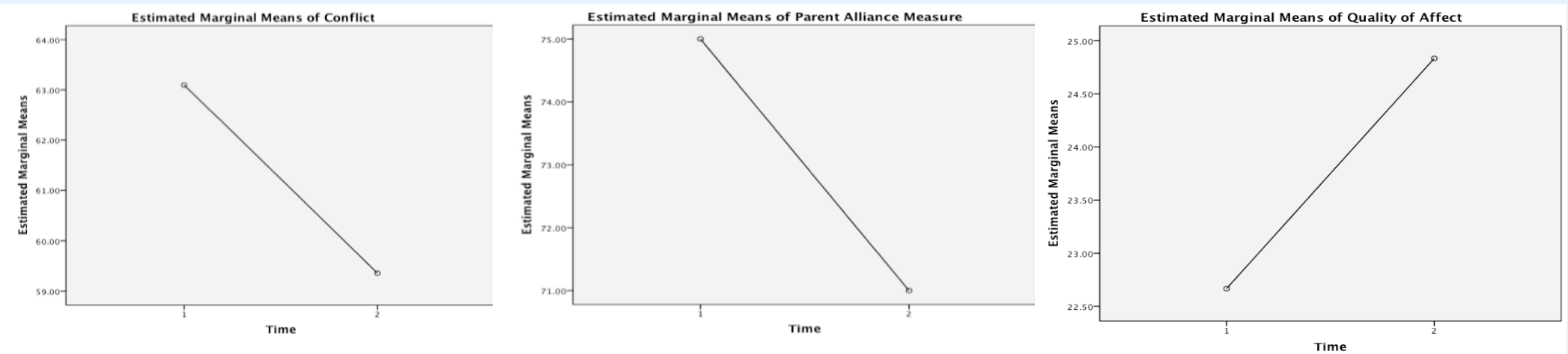
While some parties reported accomplishing their goals of participating in the program, others did not.

One party suggested that while their co-parent was cooperative throughout the program, he did not believe she was committed to their co-parenting agreement, which affected both their relationship as well as their relationship with their child.

Several parents suggested that the ability to co-parent after leaving the program would determine the true effects of skills learned.

“My goal was that my kids would gain insight into their situation and that such insight would lead to an improved relationship with me. I can't answer this question without (1) knowing the recommendations that will come from the camp staff and (2) seeing whether there is any improvement in my relationship with my kids once we return home.”

Post Conflict, Alliance and Quality of Affect



Note: Although conflict, parental alliance and quality of affect changed in the desired direction, none of these were statistically significant, as none had sufficient power for detecting differences due to small samples.

Parents who felt closer to their family members:

- Were hopeful this would continue after the program.
- Believed that the family unit as a whole was strengthened due to the shared experiences within the program.
- Reported being better able to remain child-focused and move forward in a collaborative fashion with their co-parent.

Children’s Feedback

“It (the program) is both helpful and unhelpful depending on your relationship with your parents. ”

- In most cases, children found it easier to interact with other children rather than the parents.
 - Meeting other children from divorced families who deal with having relationship issues with their father was helpful.
 - Some children exchanged emails to maintain contact and offer ongoing mutual support.

•Children offered the following advice for other children:

- *You don’t have to be nice, but be civil to your parents.*
- *Follow the directions of staff.*
- *Just hang out with your friends and try to avoid who you don’t want to see.*
- *Stay positive.*
- *Treat others as you want to be treated.*
- *Try to be a little bit more open and not cynical about your family situation.*

Implications

- Results suggest a need to provide more information about expectations of camp prior to attending the program.
- Limitation of this study includes a small sample size, which increases risk of Type II error for quantitative results.
- This evaluation provides a blueprint for evaluating the complexity of reintegration interventions.

Next Steps

- Create fidelity checklist for process and implementation of the intervention to better capture outcomes.
- Replicate pre/post test with July 2014 camp participants.
- Complete follow-up surveys with previous participants.

References

Fidler, B.J., Bala, N., & Saini, M.A. (2013). *Children who resist postseparation parental contact: A differential approach for legal and mental health professionals*. American Psychology-Law Society Series. NY: Oxford University Press.

Saini, M., Johnston, J.R., Fidler, B.J., & Bala, N. (2012). Empirical studies of alienation. In K.F. Kuehnle & L.M. Drozd (Eds.), *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court* (pp. 339-441). New York: Oxford Press.

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