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 parental 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).

**Objectives**

- The purpose of this study was to evaluate the Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (OBFC) over the past 3 years.

**Methodology**

In July of 2013, a formal evaluation was conducted 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.

A mixed methods evaluation using a pre-experimental pre-post test with 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.

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.

'1 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.'

**Purpose of Evaluation**

- 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.

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 their own challenges with their family situation.

Others felt the lack of privacy was problematic:
- "I just got to get away and talk about something positive."
- "I felt like, when the kids had a problem, there were competent staff available, their voices would be heard. This might be a counselor who would give them emotional support or a therapist."

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

Parents’ 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 the 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."

**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.

**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.
- Try to be a little bit more open and not cynical about your family situation.

**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**


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**Case Study**

Reasons for Attending OBFC

- 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.

**Post Conflict, Alliance, and Quality of Affect**

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.

**Conclusion**

"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."