

Intervention to Improve Coping Skills in Children in Divorced Families

In a recent intervention study, Clorinda Velez and colleagues at Arizona State University demonstrated that a program to improve the quality of mother-child relationships had a positive effect on children's coping ability in divorced families. Effects were still significant six years after the intervention took place.

The study is based on a sample of 240 families who had experienced a divorce in the past two years and had at least one child between the ages of 9 and 12 years at the beginning of the study. There were three groups in the study. In one group, only the mother participated in the intervention; in the second group, the mother and child each participated in separate intervention programs. A third group of families was not assigned to an intervention, but received books to read on adjustment after divorce. This group was included to compare to results for the intervention groups.

The intervention program for mothers (both mother-only and mother-child intervention groups) included 11 group sessions and 2 individual sessions. The focus of the groups was on quality of the mother-child relationship and effective discipline. The children who were included in the Mother-Child intervention group participated in 11 group sessions on effective coping, dealing with stressors related to divorce, and quality of the mother-child relationship. Families were followed up at four points, with the last follow-up point at six years after the intervention.

Mothers and children completed interviews and/or ratings of parenting behavior, family communication, and discipline before and after the intervention. Children also completed measures of coping strategies before and after the intervention as well as at three months, six months, and six years after it occurred.

Results showed that the positive effect of the intervention on quality of the mother-child relationship was critical. The quality of the mother-child relationship was a mediator between the intervention and the child coping outcomes; the intervention affected child coping skills through its effect on the quality of the mother-child relationship. These analyses were significant both at six months and six years after the intervention took place. According to the authors,

“The current study demonstrated that by increasing one of children’s most important interpersonal resources, mother-child relationship quality, the NBP [New Beginnings Program] improved youth’s coping efficacy and active coping . . . By demonstrating that children’s coping processes can be modified through parenting programs, the current findings have important implications for the design, evaluation, dissemination, and cost-effectiveness of prevention interventions as well as general clinical practice targeting divorced families (p. 255).”

Reference:

Velez, C.E., Wolchik, S.A., Tein, J. & Sandler, I. (2011). Protecting children from the consequences of divorce: A longitudinal study of the effects of parenting on children’s coping processes. Child Development, 82, 244-257.

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