The Development and Evaluation of a Post-Separation Parenting Program

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Relationship separation and divorce are increasingly common phenomena worldwide, and have the potential to detrimentally impact all family members involved. Thus, separating and divorcing individuals have been consistently shown to experience negative economic, social, physical and psychological outcomes following the termination of a couple relationship. However, relationship dissolution is not only devastating for many separating adults themselves, but can also have adverse effects on their children. Consequently, children of divorce have been shown to be at higher risk for a range of problematic outcomes compared to children from intact families, such as poorer academic achievement and increased rates of mental health problems and drug use, with these poor outcomes being shown to extend throughout adolescence and into adulthood in many cases.

In attempts to address some of the detrimental effects that parental relationship breakdown can have on separating parents and their children, post-separation parenting programs (PSPPs) have been increasingly implemented across Western nations. However, while these programs have gained widespread popularity, research establishing their effectiveness in reducing negative outcomes associated with parental relationship dissolution has lagged. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to develop an empirically-based PSPP targeting separated and divorced parents in high conflict and, following its implementation, to investigate the longitudinal effectiveness of the program in an Australian sample. A total of 49 participants completed the study (i.e., 31 intervention participants and 18 waitlist control participants), with assessment administered at the pre-intervention, post-intervention and 3-month follow-up time-points. The outcome variables included
measures of interparental conflict, the parent-child relationship, and parent and child adjustment.

No significant changes over time were observed for the waitlist control participants. For the intervention participants, the results were somewhat mixed, with improvements found over time on some of the measured conflict dimensions coupled with paradoxical deterioration on other dimensions. Improvements were also observed in relation to some aspects of parent adjustment following program completion. The findings, therefore, indicate promise for the developed program in addressing some of the issues experienced by separated and divorced parents and their children in the aftermath of parental relationship breakdown. Research limitations which may have affected the findings are considered with reference to program structure and the study methodology, and implications and future directions for PSPP research are outlined.
PREAMBLE

Relationship separation and divorce are widespread across developed nations, and have been extensively linked to detrimental outcomes in both adults experiencing relationship dissolution and their children. Thus, separating adults have been consistently found to experience negative economic, social, physical and psychological outcomes following the breakdown of a couple relationship, while adverse effects on their children may include poorer academic achievement and increased rates of mental health problems and drug use, over both the long and short term. While the precise mechanisms by which parental relationship breakdown exerts its effects on child adjustment remain to be clarified, the salient role of interparental conflict has received much attention in the literature.

Post-separation parenting programs (PSPPs) have been developed with the aim of addressing some of these problematic outcomes associated with separating and divorcing adults and their children, and have gained widespread popularity across Western communities. However, research establishing the effectiveness of these programs in reducing negative outcomes for parents and children has been slower to emerge. Given the need for rigorous evaluation studies within the PSPP field, the present study aims to develop, implement and empirically evaluate a PSPP targeted at high-conflict couples within an Australian setting.

Chapter 1 examines the increasing prevalence of relationship breakdown and the negative implications for separating adults and their children. Possible reasons for the poor adjustment of children following parental separation are explored with a focus on interparental conflict as the strongest predictor. Chapter 2 examines the utility of post-separation parenting programs (PSPPs) in addressing interparental
conflict following separation or divorce. The chapter examines PSPPs that have been implemented across Western nations and discusses the effectiveness research that has been conducted in relation to these programs to date. Finally, the chapter proposes the development of a new program for evaluation in Australia and concludes with specific predictions in relation to program effects on the domains of interparental conflict, the parent-child relationship and parental and child adjustment.

The development, implementation and evaluation of this program is the focus of the next few chapters of this thesis. Thus, Chapter 3 details the development and content of the program manual. Chapter 4 discusses the implementation of the program into the various branches of the Family Mediation Centre, and outlines the evaluation study methodology. Chapter 5 presents the evaluation results following quantitative analysis of the data. Finally, in Chapter 6, the results of the study are interpreted and discussed, along with the limitations, implications and future directions of the research.
CHAPTER 1

RELATIONSHIP SEPARATION

1.1 Relationship Separation and Divorce Defined

Relationship separation may be defined as the dissolution of a committed intimate relationship between two individuals, which may consist of either a marriage or continuous cohabitation for at least 12 months between two individuals who are romantically involved (Sweeper, 2004). The Family Law Act, 1975 defines divorce as the legally sanctioned dissolution of a marriage before the death of either spouse, cancelling the legal duties and responsibilities of marriage and dissolving matrimonial bonds between two individuals. Issues addressed in the legal divorce process may include child and spousal support, child custody arrangements, and division of property and debt. In order to receive a divorce in Australia, a couple must first be separated for at least 12 months as stipulated by the Family Law Act, 1975.

1.2 Relationship Separation Prevalence

Marriage rates have been in overall decline in recent years. While in 1986, there were 7.2 marriages per thousand people, this rate fell to a record low of 5.3 in 2001, with a slight increase to 5.5 in 2004 where it has remained in 2005, 2006 and 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008). While crude divorce rates have been fluctuating over time, a general upward trend was seen between 1986 and 2001.
However, after peaking in 2001, divorce rates have since been in slight decline, with 2.6 divorces recorded per thousand people in 2005, 2.5 in 2006 and 2.3 in 2007 (ABS, 2008). However, divorce rates remain high, with a large proportion of individuals across developed countries choosing to end their marriages this way. For example, in 1999, approximately 42% of marriages in the United Kingdom, 55% of marriages in the United States, and 37% of marriages in Germany ended in divorce (Berger & Hannah, 1999). The current divorce rate in Australia is lower than that of the U.S. and is similar to Canadian and U.K. rates, with approximately 40% of Australian couples divorcing (ABS, 2007; Statistics Canada, 1999). Many married couples separate without filing for divorce, and if such couples were to be included in statistics, it has been estimated that dissolution rates would rise to approximately 66% of marriages in developed countries such as the U.S. (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

In accordance with the prevalence of divorce, the number of children involved in marital dissolution is also high. In the U.S., 1.5 million children experience divorce each year (Schwartz, Friedman, & Tucker, 1995), and it has been estimated that approximately 40-50% of children in the current generation will live in a divorced family before the age of 18 (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Indeed, in line with these estimations, 49.3% of children under the age of 18 were involved in divorce in Australia in 2007 (ABS, 2008).

In contrast to declining marriage rates, cohabitating relationships appear to be increasing in Western societies, with more and more couples choosing to live together in an intimate couple relationship without legal or religious sanction. Marriage statistics indicate that 76.8% of couples marrying in 2007 had cohabited prior to marriage, which is in marked contrast to 1975 figures, which suggest that only around 16% of couples had lived together before they were married (ABS, 2008). The rise in cohabitation has been attributed to cultural factors such as the
‘sexual revolution’ which removed the stigma associated with sexual relations outside of marriage, and economic factors such as changes brought by industrialisation and the changing roles of women in the labour market (Bumpass, 1990; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1988). Cohabiting relationships currently make up approximately 20% of all committed couple relationships in Australia and Canada, and 12% of relationships in the U.S. (ABS, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2002).

There is no legal registration of cohabitation in many countries, including Australia, thus demographers have difficulty identifying the exact number of people forming or dissolving de facto relationships (Sweeper, 2004). Although various methods of monitoring the prevalence of cohabitation have been developed, collecting these statistics is problematic due to the difficulty in ascertaining the exact point in time cohabitation begins and ends. Individuals move in and out of each other’s homes and are not always in agreement about the nature of their relationship and living arrangements (e.g., Amato, 2000). Given the impossibility of gauging the actual rate of separation of cohabiting couples, much of the relationship separation literature has tended to include divorced individuals only. However, there is consistent evidence that de facto relationships are less stable and dissolve at an even greater rate than marriages, with cohabiting couples often ending their involvement within the first two years of the relationship (DeVaus, Qu, & Weston, 2003; Smock, 2000). Clearly therefore, including only divorced individuals in samples does not reflect the actual rate of relationship separation in the general population, and is likely to result in an underestimation of true separation rates. It has been suggested that the higher rate of dissolution of cohabiting couple relationships may be due to differences in levels of commitment compared to those in marriages (Kline et al., 2004). However, other researchers have found evidence indicating that cohabiting
couples are generally no less committed to their relationships than those who are married (Gahler, 2006). Therefore, it is unclear at this stage why rates of separation may be higher among those in cohabitation relative to those in marriages.

Decreasing marriage rates and increasing divorce rates over the past few decades have led to changes in family structure in Australia, with a growing proportion of children being born outside registered marriages to cohabiting parents. Cohabitations often include children, with estimates of the proportion of children living in a cohabiting household in the 1990s ranging from 20% of children in Canada (Juby, Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 2005) to 40% of U.S. children (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

Given the increasing prevalence of relationship separation and divorce in developed nations, and the involvement of children in parental relationship breakdown, it is imperative that the short and long-term consequences of experiencing this event are examined in relation to all parties involved in order to deliver appropriately tailored interventions to this population.

1.3 Impact of Relationship Dissolution on Separating Individuals

Marriage has been observed to have protective effects on an individual’s wellbeing, with married people reporting greater happiness, less psychological distress, a more positive self-concept and better physical health when compared to single individuals (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Ross, 1995). The positive effects of marriage have been assumed to derive from the general benefits of participating in an institutionalised relationship as well as the social support provided by spouses and their capacity to monitor each other’s health (Nock, 1998). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the loss of such an important relationship to divorce has consistently
been linked to a range of negative outcomes (Amato, 2000). The dissolution of an intimate relationship is usually a very distressing and disruptive event, and may have far-reaching negative consequences for all those involved. In most cases, divorce or separation mean the loss of the most significant relationship in one’s life, and requires adjusting to a host of life changes that follow as a result of losing this relationship.

Relationship breakdown is a multifaceted event, and has economic, social, physical and psychological consequences. Economically, marital dysfunction has been estimated to cost U.S. society billions of dollars every year (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley & Clements, 1993). Further, it has been argued that single-parent families place enormous burdens on the welfare, public policy and social systems of society (Thiriot & Buckner, 1991). Separation and divorce inevitably bring changes in the financial and residential situation of both parties and consequent economic stress (Smyth, 2004). In reviewing the consequences of divorce for separating adults, Kitson and Morgan (1990) found a decline in women’s income and living standards. Further, single parent families have been shown to face significant economic disadvantage (Cairney, Boyle, Offörd & Racine, 2003), and property disputes and custody battles are a common feature of many divorces, contributing in turn to the high economic burden on society.

Empirical studies show that marital breakdown is also linked to a number of social problems. Divorce disrupts social networks, thus divorcees have been shown to have smaller social networks and are more likely to lack social support (Gahler, 2006). Residential divorced parents typically report having significantly less social contact with other adults than do married parents, and also struggle to re-establish a social life following divorce (Amato, 2000).
Physically, the divorced display a higher mortality risk, particularly mortality as a result of certain behaviours such as suicide, motor vehicle accidents and homicide (Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Lorenz et al, 1997; Mastekaasa, 1995). Further, divorced individuals have been shown to have poorer physical health than married individuals as demonstrated by compromised immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser et al, 1987). The stressors associated with divorce such as economic instability and sole parenting issues may be associated with poor physical health through emotional problems because, as Wickrama et al. (2006) point out, stressful daily experiences can have psychological ramifications. Consequently, when family socio-economic conditions decline as a result of marital dissolution, parents may become emotionally unstable, which may in turn contribute to the development of physical ailments such as joint pains, pruritus, psoriasis, diabetes and poor metabolic control (Gavard, Lustman, & Clouse, 1993; Wickrama et al, 2006).

Individuals rate divorce as one of the most stressful of all life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and it is thus presumed to have an enormous psychological impact. Accordingly, research has linked relationship separation with a range of poor psychological and emotional outcomes. Divorced individuals have been shown to have lower levels of wellbeing, higher rates of depression, mental disorders, alcoholism, health problems, and decreases in work productivity (Barrett, 1999; Coie, Watt, & West, 1993). Overbeek, Vollebergh, Engels, & Meeus (2003) found that the risk of developing a mood disorder for young adults was two to seven times higher after the break-up of a marriage or cohabitation. Several longitudinal studies also find that depressive symptoms increase after separation and divorce (Amato & Booth, 1991; Doherty, Su, & Needle, 1989; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986).

There also appears to be a relationship between separation and increased alcohol and substance use and dependence (Doherty et al, 1989). For instance,
Overbeek et al. (2003) found that breaking up a partner relationship was linked to an increased risk for developing a substance use disorder. Horwitz et al. (1996), in a prospective study comparing change in mental health for those who were divorced at follow-up compared to those still married, also found that divorce was associated with significantly higher levels of alcohol consumption. In line with this finding, divorced individuals are more likely to die from coronary disease and cirrhosis of the liver, which is often attributed to alcohol abuse (Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Lorenz et al., 1997).

Relationship dissolution clearly has detrimental effects on the individuals involved. The negative effects, however, are not only seen in separating adults, but also extend to their children.

1.4 Impact of Parental Relationship Separation on Children

The negative impact of divorce on children has been well-documented in the literature over the past three decades, with children of divorce often being shown to be at higher risk of a host of problematic outcomes than children from intact families. For example, children exposed to divorce have been shown to have higher rates of mental health problems, lower academic achievement, and higher levels of drug use (Flewing & Bauman, 1990; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Sandler, Wolchik, & McKinnon, 1997). These children have also displayed greater externalising and internalising disorders, academic problems and social maladjustment than children not exposed to divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Other significant negative outcomes for children that have been found to be linked to divorce include higher rates of conduct disorder, school
dropout, and high-risk sexual behaviours (Brooks-Gunn & Peterson, 1991; Coie et al., 1993; McCord, 1990).

Of concern is the finding that effects of divorce appear to persist throughout childhood. Hetherington et al. (1992) found that children of divorced parents demonstrated significantly greater adjustment problems than those from intact families four to six years after divorce. In this study, 25% to 35% of children evidenced behaviour problems at the clinical level, compared to only 10% of the children from intact homes. Zill, Morrison and Coiro (1993) found that children of divorced parents were two to three times more likely to receive treatment for psychological problems than those from intact families.

Marital dissolution has been found to be accompanied by increased truancy and negative attitudes toward school, and several studies have shown that children growing up in single-parent families are less likely to complete high school or enrol in tertiary education than those growing up with intact parents (Amato, 1988; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Coleman, 1988; Corcoran, Gordon, Laren, & Solon, 1987; Mueller & Cooper, 1986). A contributing factor may be the economic status of single-parent families, who tend to be poorer than other families (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986), and whose poverty is more extreme than other groups (Bane & Ellwood, 1983). Single-parent families are also commonly faced with income insecurity (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). Indeed, differences in income have been found to account for around 30% to 50% of differences in high school graduation when comparing intact and non-intact families (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988).

Parental practices have also been implicated in these children’s early withdrawal from school. For example, while success in school has been attributed to parental discipline and the fostering of good study habits in children (Clark, 1983), it has been suggested that ineffective or inadequate parental assistance may cause a
child to feel overwhelmed which in turn increases the likelihood of school withdrawal (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Differences between married and divorced parents in regard to post-separation parenting practices have indeed been recorded in the literature. For example, parental authority has been found to be weaker in single-parent families, (Steinberg, 1987), which has been attributed to the single parent working longer hours outside the home, leaving less time to supervise children and monitor homework (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Douthitt, 1989). Single parents have also been found to make confidants of their children more often than parents in intact relationships (Devall, Stoneman & Brody, 1986), which may also contribute to the weakening of parental authority in these families.

The impact of divorce on children is not only apparent throughout childhood and adolescence, but may persist into adulthood in some cases. It is well-documented that individuals exposed to divorce in childhood are at increased risk of experiencing psychological problems later in life (Amato, 1988; Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Zill et al., 1993). One meta-analytic study found a significant association between exposure to divorce in childhood and higher depression, poorer physical health, lower educational attainment, lower income and decreased quality of marital relationships (Amato & Keith, 1991b). Other studies have shown these children to have higher rates of mental health problems in adulthood, such as anxiety (Rodgers, Power, & Hope, 1997) and increased mortality rates (Schwartz et al., 1995). Further, adults who have experienced divorce as children have been identified as having fewer social supports, lower marital quality and poorer relations with their own children (Arbuthnot & Kramer, 1998; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999). Those who are exposed to heightened interparental discord and hostile legal battles are at particular risk of experiencing various negative impacts of divorce over the long term, including higher rates of
school dropout, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, adolescent marriage, poorer life satisfaction, and eventual marital and parenting problems of their own, as demonstrated by longitudinal research (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhniken & Montes, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1999).

Clearly, parental separation and divorce can potentially have damaging effects on children involved, both in the period immediately following the marital dissolution and over the long term. It is important to note, however, that negative adjustment consequences are not inevitable, with numerous studies demonstrating resilience and healthy adjustment outcomes for the majority of children following the breakdown of their parents’ marriage (Amato & Booth, 1996; Edwards, 1987; Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Portes, Brown, Saylor & Sekhon, 2005). However, for a significant minority of children, the consequences can be devastating and enduring, and require attention in the clinical literature.

1.4.1 Reasons for the Poor Adjustment of Children Following Parental Separation. It is not entirely clear why some children of divorced parents display poorer adjustment than those not exposed to divorce, however a variety of factors have been found to influence child adjustment outcomes. For example, divorce is usually followed by several stressful and disruptive events for children, including reduced contact with the non-custodial parent, increased tension between children and custodial parents, a decline in living standards and often a residential shift or downgrade, all of which may impact negatively on children’s psychological wellbeing (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Blaisure and Geasker (1996) also found the adjustment and parenting skills of the primary custodial parent, and the nature and extent of the involvement of the non-custodial parent to be other important factors implicated in post-separation adjustment. Some studies suggest that children of
divorced parents tend to be subjected to less consistent parenting styles and less social control than those in intact families, which may also contribute to lower levels of adjustment in these children (Dombusch et al., 1985; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Steinberg, 1987).

1.4.2 Effects of Interparental Conflict on Child Adjustment. While above factors such as the absence of one parent, disruption to parenting practices and economic hardship have been suggested to play a role in the negative outcomes for children of divorce, and do appear to be implicated to some extent, research more consistently implicates the role of ongoing interparental conflict in the maladjustment of children post-separation (Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2005; Lamb & Sternberg, 1997). In fact, it has been found that exposure to high levels of conflict between parents is a stronger predictor of poor child adjustment than any other divorce-related factor (Booth & Amato, 1996; Hetherington, 1999). Illustratively, Amato and Keith, in their meta-analytic review, examined interparental conflict, parental loss and economic deprivation in relation to their impact on child adjustment, and found evidence most strongly in favour of the interparental conflict hypothesis (Amato & Keith, 1991a).

Marital separation is typically preceded by a period of conflict between the couple (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). However, interparental conflict is not only an issue prior to the divorce, but often persists after separation. While the majority of separating individuals are able to overcome their feelings of loss, anger and disappointment within a reasonable timeframe after their relationship has dissolved, a proportion of couples remain hostile and combative for many years afterwards. Indeed, research has shown that interparental conflict post-separation continues to be an issue for between 10% and 30% of separating families (Lamb & Sternberg, 1997;
This interpersonal conflict between parents can take a variety of forms, including verbal disputes, physical violence, and badmouthing (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler & Braver, 2004). Parents experiencing high conflict tend to be characterised by increased rates of litigation and relitigation, high levels of anger and distrust, periodic verbal and/or physical aggression, difficulty considering their children’s needs ahead of their own, and problems with cooperating and communicating in regards to their children following the divorce (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). Additionally, combative parents tend to display less warmth to their children and discipline them more harshly than parents who fight less frequently (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

Observing overt conflict between parents is a direct stressor for children. The undoubtedly distressing process of marital separation is made worse when parents continue to relate to each other in a hostile, antagonistic manner, and children often rate the ongoing conflict between their parents as one of the most stressful aspects of divorce (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian & Montes, 2001; Wolchik, Sandler, Braver & Fogas, 1989). Accordingly, witnessing parental disagreements has been consistently linked with children’s adjustment problems (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Kline Pruett, Nangle, & Bailey, 2000), and clinical observations have indicated that children in extremely high-conflict families are two to four times more likely to have increased levels of behavioural and mental health symptoms in comparison to national norms (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). It is well established in the literature that exposure to interparental conflict negatively affects the cognitive and emotional functioning of children, and places them at increased risk for internalising and externalising disorders (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Accordingly, these children have shown increased levels of antisocial behaviour, impulsivity, anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating (Amato & Sobolewski,
Further, exposure to high levels of interparental conflict and expressions of anger between parents has been associated with heightened emotional arousal and difficulties in affect regulation in children (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Lieberman & Van Horn, 1998). Moreover, it has been found that repeated exposure to such conflict leads to greater distress when witnessing subsequent episodes of conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1998), which has implications for the 10% to 30% of families who remain in high conflict following divorce.

The important role of interparental conflict in the poor adjustment of children is further highlighted by research showing the effects of discordant marriages on children, even when parents remain continuously married. Several cross-sectional studies have shown that people who recall discord in their parents’ marriages tend to report less happiness, more conflict and more problems in their own marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1990). Given this, it may be inferred that interparental conflict has potentially greater deleterious effects on children’s functioning than the experience of parental separation itself.

While research has consistently implicated interparental conflict in the psychological adjustment and functioning of children, less is understood in relation to the specific nature of this association. Thus, it is unclear exactly how conflict between parents interferes with the normal development and socialisation of children. This may, in part, be attributable to the conceptualisation and assessment of the construct of interparental conflict in research, with much of the literature addressing conflict as a unitary construct, despite the call by numerous investigators to acknowledge its multidimensional nature (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Tschann et al., 1999). Specifically, the measurement of conflict has often been limited to a single dimension (e.g. frequency), despite the
increasing understanding that certain types of interparental conflict such as aggressive conflict may be destructive to child adjustment, while others such as effectively resolved conflict may actually be constructive as they promote the development of conflict-management skills in children (E.M. Cummings, Vogel, Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1989; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Researchers have shown that some aspects of conflict have been particularly linked with child maladjustment. Thus, greater frequency of conflict has been shown to lead to greater child adjustment problems (see review by Davies & Cummings, 1994). Further illustrating the link between conflict frequency and child maladjustment are Kerig’s (1996) results showing that mothers reporting more frequent conflict perceived their sons to have more externalising and internalising problems, while their sons also reported heightened anxiety themselves. Another aspect of conflict that has been linked to child adjustment is intensity. Thus, conflict witnessed by children that is heated and angry in nature is more likely to lead to child distress and behaviour problems, particularly if it is aggressive (Buehler, Krishnakumar, Anthony, Tittsworth & Stone, 1994). Child-related content is another facet of conflict that is thought to impact on children’s adjustment, in that conflict around issues such as childrearing or other child-related topics have been found to lead to greater shame and self-blame in children, especially if the child internalises blame for the conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fincham, Grych & Osborne, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993).

Resolution of conflict has also been linked to child adjustment outcomes. Conflict that is poorly resolved is likely to foster ongoing tensions and negative affect within the family, whereas conflicts that are effectively resolved may model to children more adaptive ways to manage their own emotions and behaviour in conflictual situations as well as provide children with a model for constructive
problem management (Goodman, Barfoot, Frye & Belli, 1999; Grych & Fincham, 1990). In line with these predictions, mothers reporting poor conflict resolution within the family perceived greater behavioural problems in their children compared to mothers reporting good resolution of conflict (Kerig, 1996).

Another dimension of conflict that has been implicated in the adjustment of children is conflict behaviour, which may involve avoidance or engagement at the pre-conflict stage, or behaviours such as criticising, withdrawing, dominating, expressing feelings or blaming during conflictual interactions (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993). Engaging in conflict is suggested to be more constructive than actively avoiding it, given the higher levels of relationship dissatisfaction found in couples who avoid than those who tend towards engagement in conflict (Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Noller & White, 1990). This may be attributable to the messages inherent in avoidance behaviour, which conveys a desire for distance or withdrawal from the partner, compared to the apparent desire for closeness that is conveyed through willingness to engage in the conflict (Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim & Santagata, 2006). In relation to behaviours enacted during conflict engagement, research has found that distressed couples tend to engage in more destructive behaviours and fewer constructive behaviours during problem-solving tasks than nondistressed couples (Burman, Margolin & John, 1993). Such negative conflict behaviours by parents, including demanding and withdrawing, have been found to be predictive of children’s adjustment problems three years later in an observational study (Katz & Gottman, 1993), thus demonstrating a link between destructive conflict behaviours and child maladjustment.

A final conflict dimension theorised to be linked to children’s adjustment outcomes is the involvement of children in conflictual interactions. Children are more motivated to intervene in parental arguments involving child-related issues
(Grych & Fincham, 1993), thus these types of arguments may be particularly
detrimental to children. Illustratively, studies have shown that children who become
triangulated or caught in the middle of their parents’ conflicts tend to be more
depressed, anxious, withdrawn and aggressive than those not drawn into their
parent’s arguments (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991). The likelihood of
exposing children to triangulating conflict is heightened in separated families
compared to intact families given the necessity to negotiate child-related matters
such as childrearing, visitation and financial support of the children (Ahrons, 1981),
thus creating greater risk of damage to children via this type of conflict following
parental separation.

Regardless of the evidence implicating these multiple dimensions of conflict
in the adjustment outcomes of children, many studies exploring the relationship
between parents’ conflict and their children’s adjustment tend to focus solely on the
overall frequency of conflict and often do not account for these other aspects of the
conflict which may provide key information in discerning the specific mechanisms
by which interparental conflict impacts child adjustment. This is despite some
important advances in the field in relation to the multidimensional aspects of
interparental conflict. For example, Grych, Seid and Fincham’s (1992)
multidimensional measure (The Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict
Scale; CPICS), contains five conflict dimensions including conflict frequency,
intensity, resolution, content and triangulation. This measure is derived from Grych
and Fincham’s (1990) cognitive-contextual framework, which takes into account the
multidimensional nature of the interparental conflict construct, and attempts to
explain the mechanisms by which interparental conflict acts to impact children’s
adjustment. The framework proposes that marital conflict that is hostile or
aggressive, poorly resolved, and concerns the child is particularly stressful to
children, thus the frequency of this particular type of conflict is likely to be most closely linked to child adjustment problems. Conversely, conflict that is expressed with minimal anger or aggression, does not centre on child-related concerns, and is effectively resolved, is viewed as constructive and is not likely to be associated with child adjustment problems. This theory highlights the importance of measuring the different aspects of the conflict as this is integral to understanding its link to adjustment outcomes rather than limiting assessment to a unitary conceptualisation of the construct.

Other measures have been developed which similarly address the multidimensional nature of interparental conflict. For example, Kerig's (1996) Conflict and Problem-solving Scales (CPS) which measures the domains of conflict frequency, severity, resolution, efficacy, and conflict strategies (i.e., verbal aggression, physical aggression, collaboration, stalemate, avoidance-capitulation, and child involvement). However, implementation of measures assessing the various facets of conflict in separated and divorced families appears to be fairly uncommon at this stage, with much of the research in relation to non-intact couples being limited to a unitary conceptualisation of the conflict construct.

1.5 Summary of Relationship Separation

Relationship separation between both married and cohabiting couples is clearly prevalent across Western countries, and is a distressing and disruptive event with the potential to detrimentally impact all individuals involved. While relationship dissolution appears to contribute to poor outcomes for separating adults on a range of indicators including economic, social, physical and psychological, the impact of divorce may also extend to their children. Thus, children from divorced families are
considered to be at higher risk of problematic outcomes including internalising and externalising disorders, than those from intact families. These problems have also been shown to persist into adolescence and adulthood in many cases, and therefore cannot be conceptualised simply as temporary adjustment issues due to parental separation.

While a range of divorce-related factors have been implicated in the poor behavioural, emotional and social outcomes of children, research demonstrating the impact of ongoing interparental conflict on children is particularly robust. The mechanisms by which interparental conflict exerts its effects on child adjustment, however, remain to be clearly identified, as much of the research with separated and divorced families has been largely limited to unitary measurement of the conflict construct. Thus, further research that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of conflict between separated parents is required to more completely understand its role in adjustment outcomes for children.

Despite the potentially damaging effects of parental relationship dissolution and conflict to the wellbeing and adjustment of children, however, it is important to note that these effects of separation and divorce are not inevitable. Many studies have demonstrated resilience and adaptive functioning in children over time, particularly in cases where parents are able to establish a constructive coparenting relationship, manage and contain their conflict, and utilise effective parenting skills. This has important implications for the development of preventive interventions that target dysfunctional parenting factors and interparental conflict, thereby promoting healthy outcomes for children of parental separation and divorce. Investing resources in interventions aimed at reducing post-separation interparental conflict at an early stage in the process may alleviate the burden on mental health and social support
services to resolve adjustment problems later on in the child’s life (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). These interventions will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
Chapter 1 highlighted the impact of interparental conflict on children, examined some of the possible mechanisms through which this conflict affects children’s adjustment, and outlined the need for interparental conflict reduction. One method of interparental conflict reduction following separation or divorce is the implementation of post-separation parenting programs (PSPPs), which are becoming increasingly widespread in most Western nations (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis & Hoza, 1998). The current chapter will examine existing PSPPs and the research regarding the effectiveness of these programs to date, and will conclude with the proposed development of a new program for evaluation in Australia.

2.1 Post-Separation Parental Intervention

The need for interventions reducing the impact of parental separation and divorce on parents and children is clearly signalled, given: (a) that large numbers of parents and children are being exposed to interparental separation and divorce; (b) growing recognition of the impact that relationship breakdown can have on all parties involved, and; (c) heightened awareness of the role of interparental conflict in children’s adjustment and functioning. Research into child adjustment following separation and divorce has emphasised that children are generally better adjusted when parents are less hostile and conflictual in their communication with each other, when effective child-rearing and discipline strategies are implemented, and when positive and frequent parent-child contact is maintained (e.g., Dillon & Emery, 1996;
Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1985; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). While disputes between separating parents are an inevitable part of the separation process, it is possible for even highly conflictual parents to learn to manage conflicts and coparent constructively and in ways that cause less distress for their children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Camara & Resnick, 1989). It is all of these factors that have led to an emphasis on developing post-separation parenting programs (PSPPs) that target and facilitate constructive interparental communication and post-separation parental behaviours both in Australian communities and overseas.

PSPPs are generally time-limited interventions that aim to promote parental and child adjustment following divorce or separation (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004). Program content is based on providing parents with information about the impact of divorce and conflict on children and managing interparental conflict, teaching skills to help their children adjust to the separation process, promoting constructive coparenting behaviours, facilitating participant sharing and support, and reducing reliance on the courts to resolve conflict (Amato, 1994; Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Criddle, Allgood & Piercy, 2003; Fischer, 1997; Geasler & Blaisure, 1999). Programs range in terms of length, with some short-term programs lasting only an hour or two over one or two sessions, while longer-term programs comprise multiple sessions conducted over several weeks or months. Programs also differ in relation to their format or instructional strategies. Thus, some take a solely didactic, information-giving approach (see Criddle et al., 2003), while others may also encompass an experiential, skills-building component (see Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999, 2001). An information-based approach involves simply providing parents with information on topics such as the effects of divorce, available resources, and legal options and procedures (Goodman et al., 2004). This approach generally requires passive involvement of participants, with the information provided via methods such
as lectures, videotapes or handouts (Blaisure & Geasler, 2000). Such programs aim to promote understanding and insight into separation and divorce-related issues, and seek to produce a change in attitude rather than develop particular parenting or communication skills. Information-based programs are usually implemented when time and resources are limited, thus this sort of approach is more common in short-term programs. Skills-based programs, on the other hand, teach strategies for managing conflict around separation-related and parenting issues such as interparental communication, the exchange of children, parental discipline (e.g., limit setting and positive reinforcement) financial issues, holidays, and varying rules and standards in each parent’s home. This approach requires more active participant involvement, as skills are taught through activities such as role plays, workbooks, experiential exercises, group discussion, and group interaction (Blaisure & Geasler, 2000). Given the extra demands of teaching active skills to participants, skills-based approaches are more commonly found in longer term programs (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Blaisure & Geasler, 2000).

Programs may also differ in terms of whether they are accessible to the general separating or divorcing population (i.e., universal programs), or whether they are targeted at couples in entrenched, ongoing high levels of conflict specifically (i.e., targeted programs; Goodman et al., 2004). While universal programs are not specifically targeted at high-conflict families, they do address conflict-related factors implicated in children’s adjustment to separation and divorce such as parenting communication skills and children’s exposure to interparental conflict (Goodman et al., 2004).

Some programs are designed for mothers only or fathers only, and others are designed for both parents, though most programs recommend the attendance of ex-partners separately, given the often prevailing high conflict between them (Laufer &
Berman, 2006). Some parent programs also comprise a child component usually to be completed concurrently but separately by children when their parents undertake the intervention. While some research appears to provide support for these dual-component interventions (Kazdin, Siegel & Bass, 1992; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997), the majority of research does not find significant additive benefit in including child components (Stolberg & Mahler, 1994; Wolchik et al., 2000). Given the costs and resources associated with running dual-component programs (i.e., increased personnel required to facilitate and administrate the program, plus increased training and space requirements) and the lack of additive impact in including child components in PSPPs, this does not appear to be a viable option for most service providers at the current time. This rings particularly true for community agencies whose budgets and resources are often limited. Parent-only courses are justified, given that research suggests that children and families are strengthened when parents are well-adjusted emotionally and demonstrate skills in parenting, communication, and conflict management (Olson, 1988). Parent-only courses comprise the added benefit of being able to cater for a greater number of participants without the need to address differing ages and stages of development (Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg & Trotter, 1992). For these reasons, parent-only programs are far more widespread than those that incorporate parallel sessions for children.

Attendance in these programs may be mandated by the court (with parents required to attend prior to the granting of a divorce). Otherwise, participants may choose to attend voluntarily or attendance may be court-recommended but not necessarily required.

Court-affiliated PSPPs came into existence in the United States in the 1970s, and numbers have been rapidly increasing in Western communities ever since, particularly in the United States where interventions are developed in conjunction
with their court system and based on U.S. law (McIsaac & Finn, 1999). The number of U.S. counties offering PSPPs was found to triple during the 1990s, with the number of programs growing from 541 to 1,516 between 1994 and 1998 (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999). In 2002, programs were found to exist in mandated or voluntary form for separating and divorcing parents in at least half of all U.S. counties (Arbuthnot, 2002), and recent research has revealed that programs now exist in forty-six of the fifty U.S. states in some form (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Numbers continue to expand due to widespread laws requiring the attendance of divorcing parents in these programs (Douglas, 2004), coupled with increasing favour among judges towards program attendance. Illustratively, in a survey of U.S. judges on the effectiveness of divorce education programs, 81% reported positive ratings of these programs and 62% rated them as extremely helpful (Arbuthnot, Segal, Gordon and Schneider, 1994). Similarly, in a study by Fischer (1997), 80% of judges reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that a nationwide divorce education program facilitated parents’ ability to reach consensus on custody arrangements, and that participation resulted in decreased litigation. Furthermore, 98% of judges in the study agreed the program benefited families overall, while 95% stated that they believed that program participation reduced the negative impact of divorce on children (Fischer, 1997).

The picture is similar in Australia, with Family Court judges increasingly mandating divorce litigants to attend parenting programs run through organisations such as the Family Mediation Centre (FMC), Anglicare, and Relationships Australia (RA). However, there is currently no consistency between community agencies delivering these programs in terms of length of courses or content covered.
2.2 Evaluation of PSPPs

Despite the fact that PSPPs are becoming widely implemented and generally accepted by the judiciary across Western nations, empirical evidence of their effectiveness in reducing interparental conflict and improving the post-separation adjustment of parents and children has been slower to emerge. While some program evaluations have been conducted and published in the literature, the ratio of evaluations to existing programs is small. For example, Ellis and Anderson (2003) found that out of 808 U.S. cities running parenting education programs, only 14% of programs had been subject to evaluation. Similarly, the U.S. Center for Divorce Education reported in 2005 that, while there were many divorce education programs available across the U.S., few had been rigorously evaluated. The lack of empirical investigation of these types of programs has been reported previously by numerous other authors (e.g., Arbuthnot & Kramer, 1998; Kramer & Washo, 1993; McKenry et al., 1999).

The remainder of this chapter will examine the limited effectiveness research that has been conducted in relation to PSPPs targeting parents only, as these are far more common in the literature. A review table is presented, which provides an overview of PSPP evaluation studies to date and describes the participants involved in each study, outcomes of the research and methodological weaknesses and limitations (See Table 1 below).

Notably, much of the published research in this area merely describes the content of programs or reports consumer satisfaction data, which tends to be predominantly positive in nature, with participants consistently reporting high levels of satisfaction with these interventions (e.g., Buttell & Carney, 2002; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999). While satisfaction report data has been encouraging in relation to
PSPPs, this type of subjective evaluation is limited in that it does not provide insight into objective and measurable changes in behaviour, thus satisfaction with these programs does not necessarily reflect actual improvement on the relevant outcome domains. Accordingly, studies that merely report consumer satisfaction data as evidence of program effectiveness have not been included in the program review presented in Table 1 as this method was not considered an adequate form of evaluation for this review.

Relitigation rates have also been used in some PSPP evaluation studies as an indirect measure of program effectiveness. Thus, a post-program reduction in relitigation rates in the participant group compared to the nonparticipant group is interpreted as an indication that the program was successful in reducing conflict (e.g., McClure, 2002; Pruett, Insabella & Gustafson, 2005). The use of relitigation rates as a gauge of levels of interparental conflict and coparenting difficulties is based on the research of Ash and Guyer (1986), who found that conflictual families tended to relitigate post-divorce custody decisions more often than control families. However, while relitigation rates may have some utility as a measure of post-program conflict reduction, and are an easily accessible measure given their quantification via court records rather than via participants themselves, it has been suggested that they provide a rather crude measure of effectiveness. This is because, firstly, not all highly conflictual families return to court to settle disputes. Secondly, relitigation is sometimes beneficial for families; for example, in the case of reassessing a visitation schedule in order to reflect the different stages of a child’s development (Kramer et al., 1998; Kramer & Kowal, 1998). Given the limitations inherent in using court records as a measure of program effectiveness, studies which rely solely on this method of assessment are also excluded from the review presented in Table 1.
## Table 1

**Evaluation Studies of Post-Separation Parenting Programs**

### A. Short-Term Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Title, Evaluation Study &amp; Year</th>
<th>Format (Skills-based vs. Info-based) &amp; Program Content/ Goals</th>
<th>Program Length, Evaluation Design &amp; Participants</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Outcomes and Study Limitations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Children in the Middle</td>
<td>Skills-based Aims to teach skills for resolving conflict and keeping children out of the middle of parental disputes through video vignettes, group discussion, information booklets.</td>
<td>Program Length: 1 x 2-hour session. Study Design: Post-intervention assessment and 6-month follow-up Participants: Mothers and fathers. Mandated attendance. Intervention condition (n = 48) and control condition (n = 23)</td>
<td>Informal parent ratings of children’s exposure to conflict (frequency with which children were placed in the middle of conflict) and awareness of their children’s perspective and needs, their interparental conflict management skills, and consumer satisfaction ratings.</td>
<td>Parents reported mastery of conflict reduction skills, (i.e. significant declines in the frequency with which they placed children in the middle of conflict and exposed children to conflict) and maintained this skill mastery over time. Intervention group reported more favourable attitudes to child access with the other parent, better knowledge of keeping children out of conflict, and better relationships with the other parent than the control group. Child adjustment did not differ between the groups. Limitations: Did not employ an adequate longitudinal design, i.e. lacked a pre-intervention measure for comparison. Required parents to report on behaviours retrospectively. Lack of established outcome measures. Limited to self-report data only.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Title, Evaluation Study &amp; Year</td>
<td>Format (Skills-based vs. Info-based) &amp; Program Content/ Goals</td>
<td>Program Length, Evaluation Design &amp; Participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arbuthnot, J., Kramer, K. M. &amp; Gordon, D. A. (1997)</td>
<td>As Above</td>
<td>Program Length: 1 x 2-hour session. Study Design: Post-intervention and 6-month follow-up assessments Participants: Mothers and fathers. Intervention condition (n = 48) and control condition (n = 23)</td>
<td>Informal parent-report assessments of (1) relitigation rates; (2) mastery of skills taught through the program, and; (3) child adjustment.</td>
<td>Significantly less relitigation was reported by intervention participants than those in the control group. Program participants also reported greater skill mastery than controls, and skill mastery was also associated with reduced relitigation. No association was found between relitigation rates and child adjustment variables. Limitations: Did not employ an adequate longitudinal design, i.e. lacked a pre-intervention measure for comparison. Lack of established outcome measures. Limited to self-report data only.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting Brandon, D. J. (2006)</td>
<td>Information-based</td>
<td>Program Length: 1 x 4-hour session. Study Design: Pre- and post-intervention assessment and 3 to 9 month follow-up. Stated that random selection was achieved but did not describe how this was done. Participants: Mothers and fathers. Intervention condition only (n = 345).</td>
<td>Informal self-report assessments of (1) the use of detrimental parenting behaviours; (2) level of cooperation with the former partner, (3) attitude changes, and; (4) participant satisfaction. 3-9 month follow-ups on cooperation with ex-partner and behavioural changes, then periodic assessments over the next 2 years of same variables.</td>
<td>Parents reported a perception of less triangulation of children in interparental conflict from post to follow-up, but interparental conflict was found to increase overall (from pre to follow-up). Limitations: The lack of a control group prevents the attribution of changes to program participation. Lack of established outcome measures (in favour of single-item rating scales). Parents may have underreported actual levels of triangulating behaviours at baseline. Measurement of interparental conflict limited (to extent of cooperation with former partner, and whether conflict occurred in the presence of children). Did not assess child adjustment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Title, Evaluation Study &amp; Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Utah Divorce Education Program</td>
<td>Information-based</td>
<td>Program Length: Short-term, though exact duration or number of sessions not provided. Study Design: Post-assessment obtained from divorced parents in 2 counties that were mandated to attend the program, and from those in 4 nearby counties not mandated (and so did not attend). Non-attenders became the control group. Participants: Mothers and fathers mandated to attend. Intervention condition (n = 160) and control condition (n = 59).</td>
<td>Included informal self-report assessment (via 5-7 minute telephone interview) of interparental conflict, coparenting, and amount of post-divorce litigation. Items from an established measure of autonomy from and intimacy with the ex-partner also included.</td>
<td>Attendance in the program was associated with decreased interparental conflict. Program participation was also associated with reduced litigation as the number of children in the family increased. Limitations: Did not utilise established outcome measures of conflict or coparenting. No measure of child adjustment included. Relyed solely on self-report data. Information was not provided on quantity of treatment contact time. Did not employ an adequate longitudinal design, i.e. lacked a pre-intervention measure for comparison. Attendance in other post-divorce programs was not controlled for in the intervention or control group.</td>
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<td>Douglas, E. M. (2004)</td>
<td>Information-based</td>
<td>Program Length: Not specifically stated, though appears to be a single session of unspecified duration. Study Design: Post-assessment obtained from divorced fathers mandated to attend in one county (intervention condition), and those in two nearby counties who did not attend (control condition). Participants: Fathers only (N = 205).</td>
<td>Included informal self-report measures of: (1) father-child contact; (2) quality of the father-child relationship; (3) father adjustment; (4) father involvement in child-related activities (school, leisure and decision-making), and; (5) level of interparental conflict. No significant effects found on any of the outcome measures (i.e. father-child contact, father-child relationship quality, father involvement in child-related activities, level of interparental conflict). Limitations: Did not utilise established outcome measures. Relyed solely on self-report data. No measure of child adjustment included. Did not employ an adequate longitudinal design, i.e. lacked a pre-intervention measure for comparison. Included only a unidimensional measure of interparental conflict (i.e., measured conflict level only).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Title, Evaluation Study &amp; Year</td>
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<td><strong>Children First</strong></td>
<td>Information-based</td>
<td><strong>Program Length:</strong> 2 sessions of 90 mins duration each. <strong>Study Design:</strong> Pre- and post-assessments with 3 month follow-up obtained from the intervention condition. Pre-assessment and 3-month follow-up assessments obtained from the control group (divorced parents from another county who did not participate in a program). <strong>Participants:</strong> Mothers and fathers. Intervention condition ( n = 168 ) and control condition ( n = 43 ).</td>
<td>Included informal self-report measures of: (1) helpfulness of the program; (2) parent and child adjustment to divorce; (3) parent-child relationship quality; (4) coparenting relationship quality; (5) engagement in adaptive and triangulating child-rearing behaviours, and; (6) use of additional resources for divorcing families.</td>
<td>Parents reported that the program was helpful, however no significant improvements seen on any of the outcome measures, with the exception of the high-conflict parent group who reported that their former spouse was using fewer triangulating behaviours at the 3-month follow-up point, but did not report the same for themselves. Thus, program may have benefit for high-conflict couples only. <strong>Limitations:</strong> Reliance on self-report measures only. Established outcome measures were not utilised. Included only a unidimensional measure of interparental conflict (i.e. measured frequency only) using a single-item rating scale.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kramer, L. &amp; Washo, C. (1993)</td>
<td>Video vignettes of maladaptive interaction between divorced family members shown, followed by group discussion identifying problematic behaviours, children’s consequent feelings and more constructive coping strategies. Provides parents with written info about other divorce-related resources and a summary of points covered in the program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kramer, L. &amp; Kowal, A. (1998)</td>
<td>As Above</td>
<td>Program Length: As above</td>
<td>Parents completed an abbreviated version of the 1993 questionnaire. Included were informal self-report measures of (1) interparental conflict; (2) adaptive parenting, and; (3) triangulation of children in interparental conflict. Court records also inspected for litigation rates in the 2 years prior and 3 years following program inception. Relitigation rates rose in the county in which the program was administered. There were no significant differences in relitigation frequency between the groups at 6-year follow-up. But, relitigation rates were lower in the higher-risk attendees (i.e. those reporting higher conflict &amp; triangulation behaviours &amp; lower levels of adaptive parenting) than controls. So, program appears to be most helpful for high-conflict families. Limitations: Established outcome measures not used. Did not assess child adjustment. Use of litigation rates provides an inexact measure of divorce program success. Six-year retention rate was poor (only 26%). Included only a unidimensional measure of interparental conflict (i.e., measured frequency only) using a single-item rating scale.</td>
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<td>Study Design: 6-year follow-up evaluation to the above Kramer and Washo (1993) study. Pre-assessment and 6-year follow-up assessments administered. Participants: The original Kramer &amp; Washo (1993) sample of 211 total participants was reduced to 44 in the intervention condition and 10 in the control condition (N = 54) in this study.</td>
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Parents completed an abbreviated version of the 1993 questionnaire. Included were informal self-report measures of (1) interparental conflict; (2) adaptive parenting, and; (3) triangulation of children in interparental conflict. Court records also inspected for litigation rates in the 2 years prior and 3 years following program inception. Relitigation rates rose in the county in which the program was administered. There were no significant differences in relitigation frequency between the groups at 6-year follow-up. But, relitigation rates were lower in the higher-risk attendees (i.e. those reporting higher conflict & triangulation behaviours & lower levels of adaptive parenting) than controls. So, program appears to be most helpful for high-conflict families. Limitations: Established outcome measures not used. Did not assess child adjustment. Use of litigation rates provides an inexact measure of divorce program success. Six-year retention rate was poor (only 26%). Included only a unidimensional measure of interparental conflict (i.e., measured frequency only) using a single-item rating scale.
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</table>
Based on Social Learning Theory and parenting skills training. Aims to educate parents in relation to facts about divorce; the grief process for adults & children; negative effects of divorce on children; facilitating children's divorce-related adjustment; role of the residential and non-residential parent; communication skills; coparenting; family restructuring & legal aspects of divorce.  
Methods include role plays, slides, videos, and didactic materials. | **Program Length:** 1 x 2.5 hour seminar.  
**Study Design:** Post-assessment 4 years after intervention with a control group. Random selection of participants.  
**Participants:** Mothers and fathers. Intervention condition (n = 136) and control condition (n = 100) | Retrospective self-report perceptions of program efficacy four years following completion of the program. Assessed: (1) coparenting relationship (i.e. support and conflict) via two established measures and single-item rating scales; (2) the parent-child relationship via single-item ratings of parent satisfaction and pre/post-divorce ratings of perceived closeness with children and parental effectiveness; (3) adjustment to custody/visitation via single-item rating scales of satisfaction with custody and with informal changes in custody; (4) attitude toward the non-residential parent via a standardised scale; (5) Knowledge about children post-divorce via a 12-item author-developed inventory. | A program effect was found in relation to the parent-child relationship for those divorced four years or less, but did not appear to impact the other domains, i.e. the coparenting relationship, adjustment to custody and visitation, or attitude toward the non-residential parent, or knowledge about children post-divorce. Program participants perceived the program to be beneficial.  
**Limitations:** Did not employ an adequate longitudinal design, i.e. lacked a pre-intervention measure for comparison. Sample not representative of general divorcing population. Limited to self-report data only. Retrospective recall of events and feelings from years prior is problematic. No measure of child adjustment included. Utilisation of single-item rating scales, which are not considered reliable or valid. Measurement of interparental conflict limited (to frequency). |
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assisting Children Through the Transition (ACT)</strong> Pedro-Carroll, J., Nakhnikian, E. &amp; Montes, G. (2001)</td>
<td>Skills-based</td>
<td>Based on the Theory of Change. Aims to educate parents in relation to: children’s developmental needs &amp; emotional reactions; reducing stress on children; skills for communicating &amp; negotiating with ex-partner; problem-solving; anger control; conflict management; parenting practices, &amp; strengthening parent-child relationships. Methods include lectures, video vignettes, role plays, and group discussion.</td>
<td>Program Length: 2 x 3.5-hour weekly sessions. Study Design: Pre- and post-intervention assessments. Participants: Mothers and fathers.</td>
<td>Informal, author-developed self-report measures of participants’ changes in attitudes and understanding of program content, and parent's intention to utilise skills taught in the program.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Kids In Divorce and Separation (KIDS) Program</strong> Shifflett, K. &amp; Cummings, E. (1999)</td>
<td>Information-based</td>
<td>Aims to educate parents in relation to the impact of divorce and interparental conflict on children, to promote more constructive conflict-related attitudes and behaviours, and to improve the quality of the coparenting relationship.</td>
<td>Program Length: 2 x 2-hour sessions (2 weeks apart). Study Design: Random assignment to intervention or waitlist condition. Control group recruited from an existing general parenting class. Pre- and post-intervention assessments with 1-month follow-up. Participants: Mothers and fathers.</td>
<td>Established self-report measures of frequency and content of interparental conflict and exposure of children to conflict and its resolution, and parent’s own and ex-partner’s parenting and conflict behaviours. An author-created measure of knowledge attained through the program and a consumer satisfaction questionnaire were also included.</td>
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Families in Transition (U.S. program. Also run in the Republic of Ireland)

Mainly info-based
Psychoeducational/experiential in nature. Parent program sessions aim to enhance parental competence by teaching skills to deal with children’s divorce-related concerns; coparental relationships, and parent-child relationships. It has an experiential orientation that is reinforced with workbooks.

The child sessions of the program aim to address misperceptions in relation to divorce, coping with anger about divorce, and coping skills for dealing with divorce.

Program Length: 3 x 2-hour sessions.
Study Design: Pre- and post-intervention assessments
Participants: Both parents and children between 8 and 16 are court mandated to attend the sessions (separately).

In the current study evaluating the parent program, N = 479

Informal measures of: (1) parents’ attitudes toward the program; (2) parents’ attitudes toward 5 child-centred divorce adjustment behaviours; (3) parents’ likelihood of being able to enact these child-centred divorce adjustment behaviours (in line with the theory of planned behaviour). Also included analysis of factors that may mediate the predicted impact of the program (i.e., marital duration, time since separation, conflict amount and intensity over last 6 months on a 6-item scale; child distress and parental use of counselling support services to help manage divorce).

Parents were significantly more positive about program attendance at post than at pre. Significant differences were found for all child-centred divorce adjustment behaviours from pre to post, except for conflictual communications, which was viewed consistently as unfavourable.

In relation to the likelihood of being able to engage in these behaviours, parents initially reported being very likely to engage in the behaviours at pre, and were even more certain of their likelihood to act by post. It was found the more conflict reported and the greater its intensity, the more parents reported intent to engage in conflictual communication, and the less they reported their likelihood to encourage child communication with the other parent and to share contact information with the child about the other parent.

Limitations: social desirability (demand characteristics) are probable in parents’ reports of their attitudes and engagement in socially desirable parenting behaviours. Did not measure actual behaviour, just intention to act.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Program Title, Evaluation Study &amp; Year</th>
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<th>Program Length, Participants and Evaluation Study Design</th>
<th>Assessment Tool(s)</th>
<th>Outcomes and Study Limitations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation for Divorcing Parents (ODP)</td>
<td><strong>Skills-based</strong>&lt;br&gt;Community-based, psychoeducational and experiential (skill-building etc).&lt;br&gt;Teaches parents strategies for coping with and adjusting to divorce, educates parents about children’s post-divorce adjustment, and promotes constructive communication with the ex-partner.</td>
<td><strong>Program Length:</strong> 5 x 2-hour weekly sessions.&lt;br&gt;<strong>Study Design:</strong> Pre- and Post-assessment (at 10 weeks post-program). Method of assignment to the intervention or non-intervention (questionnaire only) condition was by self-selection.&lt;br&gt;<strong>Participants:</strong> Mothers and fathers (separately). Intervention condition (n = 68) and control condition (n = 31).</td>
<td>Consumer satisfaction data, and self-report data collected on 4 domains: (1) Parent adjustment assessed using Likert-type scales and some established measures; (2) Child adjustment measured via parent report using one established and some informal measures; (3) Parenting quality was measured via one established and some informal measures; (4) Quality of the former partner relationship was assessed via informal measures of interparental conflict, coparenting conflict and settlement conflict frequency.</td>
<td>Participants were generally satisfied with the program. Participants did not evidence better outcomes than the control participants on parent or child adjustment, parenting, former partner relations or coparenting variables. Authors speculate that this lack of change differences between the groups may be due to pre-test differences between the groups on levels of conflict, i.e. participants had greater difficulty resolving conflict than nonparticipants given they were more likely to be contesting aspects of the divorce settlement and experiencing more stress. <strong>Limitations:</strong> Lack of established measures of coparenting and former partner relations. Self-selection into intervention and control conditions possibly leading to conflict bias in intervention group. Lack of follow-up to examine changes over time.</td>
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| **Dads For Life**  
Cookston, J., Beaver, S., Griffin, W., De Luse, S. & Miles, J.  
(2006) | Skills-based  
Aims to improve the father-child relationship by increasing the father’s parenting skills and motivation for high-quality parenting. Also aimed to reduce interparental conflict and improve the coparenting relationship. Teaches parenting skills (listening, communication, effective discipline) and conflict reduction skills via video and group discussion and activities, role plays, homework tasks and handouts. | Program Length: 8 x 1.75-hour group sessions, then 2 x 45-minute one-on-one sessions.  
Study Design: Random assignment of participants to intervention condition or a self-study placebo control condition. Pre- and post-intervention with 4-month and 1-year follow-up assessments.  
Participants: Fathers only. Mothers also assessed on outcome variables, though did not participate in the program (N = 132 paired parents). | Parent reports from both parents on an author-adapted version of an established measure of interparental conflict (frequency, intensity and resolution subscales). The coparental relationship was also assessed via an author-adapted 5-item coparenting inventory.  
Both mothers and fathers reported less conflict over time when the father participated in the program compared to controls. Perceptions of coparenting did not change over time for fathers in the intervention or control conditions. Mothers perceptions of support declined over time in the control group, but those whose ex-partners underwent the intervention reported significant positive growth change toward healthier coparenting.  
Limitations: Threats to external validity (i.e., self-selection by participants may have biased results.) Did not assess child adjustment. | |
| **Kids’ Turn**  
Cookston, J. T., & Fung, W. W.  
(2011) | Skills-based  
Aims to educate parents in relation to the impact of divorce and inter-conflict on children and children’s divorce-related adjustment, effective parenting styles and communication with children and the other parent, the ex-partner relationship and coparenting issues. Skills are taught via video, group discussion and activities, role plays, homework tasks and handouts. | Program Length: 6 x 2-hour sessions.  
Study Design: Pre- and post-assessment design. Intervention group only.  
Participants: Mothers and fathers (separately)(N = 61). Children also completed program separately from parents (child outcomes not assessed in this study). | Established self-report measures of: (1) the coparenting relationship (i.e., conflict severity, coparenting, parental alienation & conflict breadth); (2) the parent-child relationship (i.e. sharing problems with parent, divorce communication, parent-child communication, family routines); (3) parental adjustment and identification with the parenting role (4) child behavioural adjustment.  
In the coparenting domain, a significant decrease was found in interparental conflict (intensity and frequency), conflict breadth (number of topics disagreed upon), and parental alienation. In the parental adjustment & parenting role domain, significant decreases in depression & anxiety but no changes in parenting identity found. In the child behavioural adjustment domain, a significant decrease in internalising behaviours (anxiety and depression) reported. No significant changes found in the parent-child relationship domain.  
Limitations: Lack of a control group, small sample size, limited to self-report measures only. | |
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parenting for Divorced Fathers</strong></td>
<td>Skills-based</td>
<td>Goals were to enhance fathers’ parenting competence and to promote the father-child relationship and child support payments. Aims to achieve these goals via parental education and role plays in relation to the experience of divorced fatherhood, enhancing parent-child communication (listening and talking), coparenting, parent-child activities, and future directions.</td>
<td>Program Length: 6 x 90-minute weekly sessions. Study Design: Pre- and post-intervention assessments with a control group Participants: Fathers only. Intervention condition (n = 9) and control condition (n = 11)</td>
<td>Included informal self-report questionnaire measures of parenting behaviours, parenting satisfaction and perceived parental competence, and two established validated measures of parent satisfaction.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parent Education Program (Israel)</strong></td>
<td>Skills-based</td>
<td>Goals: To provide info on the impact of divorce on children; promote awareness of children’s and parents needs in the context of divorce; teach methods for meeting children’s needs; encourage effective interparental communication and cooperation in relation to parenting issues; facilitate mutual support of group members. Techniques: Group discussions, role plays, guided imagination, therapeutic cards and film demonstrations.</td>
<td>Program Length: 4 x 3-hour sessions. Study Design: Post questionnaires only Participants: Mothers and fathers (separately) (N = 130)</td>
<td>Informal, author-developed Likert scale questionnaire measures of consumer satisfaction and the extent to which the program achieved its goals.</td>
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<td><strong>Parenting Through Change</strong></td>
<td>Skills-based</td>
<td>Program Length: 14 weekly sessions of unspecified duration. Study Design: Randomised experimental design with a control group. Pre- and post-assessments with a 6 and 12-month follow-up. Participants: Divorcing mothers &amp; their sons in Grades 1-3 (n = 238) were randomly assigned to the intervention condition (n = 153) or the no-intervention control condition (n = 85).</td>
<td>Multi-informant, multi-method assessments. i.e. observations of mother-child interaction in the lab, established parent, child &amp; teacher-report questionnaires, structured interviews with mothers &amp; children. Areas assessed: (1) parenting practices (e.g., negative reinforcement &amp; reciprocity, skill encouragement &amp; problem-solving) &amp; (2) child adjustment.</td>
<td>Reductions observed in intervention group over the 12-month period overall (despite initial increase at the 6-month mark) in relation to negative parenting practices. Practices increased in control group. Improvements also seen in effective parenting practices &amp; child adjustment. Teachers also reported improved school adjustment. Intervention associated with improved parenting, which in turn predicted improved child adjustment (though no direct benefit to child adjustment was found in the first year). Limitations: Did not assess coparenting or interparental conflict (only mother-child conflict). Participants were mothers only, so effect of program on fathers unknown. Experimental design, thus results may not generalise to real-world settings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forgatch, M. &amp; DeGarmo, D.</td>
<td>Aimed to provide training in parenting practices (i.e. non-coercive discipline, contingent encouragement, monitoring and problem-solving) &amp; other divorce-related issues (emotion regulation and conflict management). Mid-week phone calls made to encourage use of procedures &amp; to trouble-shoot problems with home practice assignments. Methods included videos, hand-outs, homework tasks, role-plays</td>
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<td>(1999 and 2001)</td>
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<td><strong>Cooperative Parenting and Divorce Program</strong></td>
<td>Skills-based</td>
<td>Program Length: 6 x 2-hour weekly sessions. Study Design: Random assignment to intervention or waitlist control condition. Pre- and post-intervention assessments. Participants: Mothers and fathers (separately). (N = 32).</td>
<td>Informal Likert-type scales measuring: (1) overall relationship hostility; (2) own coparenting ability and coparenting ability of the other parent; (3) own ability to deal with certain child-related behaviours and other parent’s ability to deal with same behaviours; (4) helpfulness of the program.</td>
<td>Significant program effects on perceived overall relationship hostility, and coparenting ability and behaviour for both the self and the other parent. Participants’ litigation rates also appeared to reduce post-program. Limitations: Small sample size. Lack of follow-up data to assess changes overtime. Child adjustment not assessed, and interparental conflict measurement was limited.</td>
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<td>Whitehurst, D. H., O’Keefe, S.L. &amp; Wilson, R. A.</td>
<td>Aims to educate participants re changing parental roles post-divorce, the impact of interparental conflict on children &amp; other child-related post-divorce issues. Teaches impulse control, anger management, communication &amp; conflict resolution skills with the aim of improving the coparenting relationship.</td>
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<td>New Beginnings</td>
<td>Skills-based&lt;br&gt;Based on social learning and cognitive-behavioural principles of behaviour change. Aims to educate mothers in relation to improving mother-child relationship quality, effective discipline, supporting the father-child relationship, and reducing interparental conflict. Aims to educate children in relation to effective coping, negative thoughts about divorce stressors, and improving the mother-child relationship. Imparts information and teaches skills via lecture presentations, videotapes, role plays, modelling, and homework tasks.</td>
<td>Program Length: 11 x 1.75 hour group sessions plus 2 x 1 hour individual sessions over 12 weeks. Study Design: Pre-intervention, post-intervention and 6-month follow-up assessments. Participants: Mother-only intervention condition (n = 81), dual-component mother and child intervention condition (n = 83), and a self-study control condition (n = 76).</td>
<td>Multiple informant, multi-method assessment including mother and child-reported questionnaire measures, teacher reports and videotaped mother-child interactions. Included established measures of: (1) mother-child relationship quality; (2) discipline; (3) interparental conflict (frequency); (4) support of the father-child relationship; (5) appraisals of divorce stressors; (6) child coping (also measured via collection of qualitative data from children); and; (7) children's psychological adjustment variables (externalising and internalising behaviours).</td>
<td>Program effects found for mother-child relationship quality, discipline, and support of the father-child relationship at post-assessment. No program effects found in relation to interparental conflict or amount of father-child contact at post. Children in the mother condition evidenced reductions in mother-child reports of internalising and externalising behaviours. However, teacher report of children's adjustment did not show program effects. Program effects on all measured domains not maintained at 6-month follow-up, with the exception of externalising problems (particularly for those with higher levels of problematic behaviours on entry to the program), suggesting the need for maintenance sessions. Limitations: Stringent inclusion criteria that excluded high-risk individuals from participation. Highly controlled efficacy trial thus results not generalisable to natural service delivery conditions. Conflict measured as a unidimensional construct only (frequency).</td>
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Study Design: Six-year follow-up evaluation of the above study. Assessments conducted with families with adolescents aged between 15 and 19 years.
Participants: 91% (N = 218) of the above sample was re-interviewed at the 6-year follow-up point. | Assessed adjustment of the adolescent children of postdivorce families on a variety of outcome measures. Established self-report measures of: (1) mental health (internalising & externalising disorders), and; (2) alcohol and drug use. Number of sexual partners was also assessed. | Found that children benefit from the program 6 years after the intervention on a range of measures, i.e. reduced levels of mental health problems, reduced use of drugs and alcohol, fewer sexual partners, fewer externalising problems (but not internalising problems). Those at greatest risk of developing problems benefited the most from the program.
Limitations: White, middle-class sample and group differences between participators and non-participators limits the generalisability of results. |
2.3 Methodological Issues in PSPP Evaluation Research

Before commencing a more detailed review of the PSPP evaluation research presented in Table 1, it is important to note that, while some research in the area has demonstrated particular rigour (e.g., Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999, 2001; Wolchik et al., 2000, 2002), PSPP research overall is still in its relative infancy, thus methodological limitations are common within the field. Despite the exclusion of studies relying solely upon consumer satisfaction data and relitigation rates from the review, it is evident that program evaluation measures across the field tend to be quite limited, with a common method of program evaluation being participant-reported changes in parenting skills, attitudes and child adjustment via informal measures derived by the authors from the program objectives (e.g., Arbuthnot et al., 1996, 1997; Douglas, 2004; Laufer & Berman, 2006; Pedro-Carroll et al., 2001). Few studies utilise formal established measures with psychometric properties that have been validated in research. Problematic also, is the lack of studies assessing interparental conflict in appropriate depth. Given the integral role that interparental conflict has been demonstrated to play in the adjustment of children post-separation and divorce, and the differing outcomes associated with the various dimensions of conflict outlined in Chapter 1, it seems imperative that evaluation studies in the field include psychometrically reliable and valid multidimensional conflict measures. Currently, however, assessment of conflict in PSPP evaluation research is largely limited to the frequency of its occurrence, while access to alternative dimensions such as intensity, conflict resolution and conflict style is severely lacking in the published literature. It was established in Chapter 1 that research has linked different aspects of conflict with increased child adjustment problems (for example, conflict that is frequent, intense, and poorly resolved; Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1990), while
some types of conflict have not been shown to impact negatively on the adjustment of children (for e.g., conflict that is resolved or non-aggressive in nature; Grych et al., 1990). Thus, it is important that studies capture the multidimensional nature of the construct if we are to understand exactly how conflict impacts on children post-separation and divorce.

Even less common in PSPP evaluation is the assessment of behavioural outcomes by trained, objective observers. Instead, this area of research is largely reliant on parent’s reports of their own and their children’s behavioural changes, which may be confounded by social desirability. As pointed out by Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996), it is difficult to be sure that parents are implementing skills learned in these programs without evidence of changes in parental behaviours and/or children’s responses.

As outlined by Fackrell, Hawkins and Kay (2011), the strongest evidence for program effectiveness is the comparison of an intervention group to a no-treatment control group. True experimental designs involving random assignment to groups are rare within the PSPP evaluation field, with the exceptions of studies by Wolchik et al. (2000) and Forgatch and DeGarmo (1999, 2001; outlined in Table 1). Quasi-experimental designs utilising a non-randomised waiting-list control or comparison group are more common within the PSPP evaluation area due to the fact that much of the research is conducted on the field in community-based settings rather than in stringent laboratory environments or university settings in which variables are more easily controlled. In field research, employment of a reasonable comparison group is often the best that can be achieved. Also common within the PSPP evaluation research field are one-group/pre-post design studies (examples presented in Table 1 include: Brandon, 2006; Cookston & Fung, 2011; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian & Montes, 2001; Yankeelov et al., 2003). These types of studies, while often
informative, can be problematic in that effects cannot be directly attributed to the intervention.

Another methodological limitation evident in some of the research in the PSPP evaluation field has been the measurement of outcomes at the post-assessment point only (examples presented in Table 1 include: Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Criddle et al., 2003; Douglas, 2004; McKenry et al. 1999; Laufer & Berman, 2006). While post-test-only assessments can provide some indication of the extent of learning in relation to program material, they provide inadequate data to draw conclusions in relation to changes over time. Further, the lack of follow-up data is problematic given that program outcomes may not take effect immediately following program completion (Kramer et al., 1998), thus some benefits of the intervention may be missed. Lebow and Gurman (1995) also highlight a contrasting tendency for earlier assessments of treatments to find greater effects than subsequent examinations (Lebow & Gurman, 1995). Thus, given the potential for either of these possibilities to occur, and the importance of addressing the durability of change over time, the administration of follow-up assessments seem imperative in the pursuit of obtaining a complete and accurate report of program outcomes.

2.4 Review of PSPP Evaluation Research

As noted in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter and illustrated in Table 1, PSPPs differ widely in terms of their length (i.e., short-term versus long-term), format (i.e., information-based versus skills-based) and targeted participants (i.e., separated or divorced parents universally versus those in high conflict, and those targeted at father-only or mother-only participants), with different elements of program format or delivery being investigated for effectiveness in research.
2.4.1 Program Length and Format. Program length has been a particularly important question for consideration in the PSPP research, with the effectiveness of short-term programs often being compared to that of programs with longer duration. Short-term programs are more prolific in communities than long-term programs. For example, in a 1999 survey of 1500 U.S. counties offering post-separation parenting programs, Geasler and Blaisure found that most tended to be brief in nature, typically offering only one to two sessions lasting two to four hours on average. Very few programs reviewed required a greater time commitment. There has been an increase in the numbers of long-term programs (i.e., those consisting of 10 or more contact hours) since Geasler and Blaisure’s (1999) review, and the outline of studies presented in Table 1 presents a fairly even distribution of short- and long-term program reviews in the literature. However, the number of reviews is not reflective of the actual distribution of the types of programs functioning in community service delivery settings, where a bias towards short-term programs appears to exist due to budgetary, resource and personnel constraints (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Goodman et al., 2004).

This bias towards short-term programs in favour of long-term ones has implications, given that some research suggests that programs of longer duration may produce better treatment outcomes than briefer interventions. Illustratively, while seven of the eight (87.5%) evaluation studies of long-term programs reviewed in Table 1 yielded significant change across various measured domains, only seven of the ten (70%) short-term evaluations found strong evidence of change. Particularly convincing evidence for the effectiveness of longer term programs over shorter term ones, are the comparative results of studies by Devlin et al. (1992) and Douglas (2004). Both studies evaluated the Parenting for Divorced Fathers program, with
Douglas examining a short-term version of the program, and Devlin et al. evaluating an extended version. No significant changes on any of the measured variables were found by Douglas for the shorter version of the program, while Devlin et al., found significant positive change results in relation to parenting competence and father-child communication for the longer program (as outlined in Table 1). Bacon and McKenzie (2004), in reviewing 10 programs across Canada, found further evidence for programs of longer duration compared to those of shorter duration. Thus, the authors found that change varied across programs of different lengths, with the greatest amount of change seen in groups of six hours or longer.

Program format has also been an important focus of evaluative research, with research focusing on the effectiveness of information-based programs compared to skills-based ones. Specifically, the utility of information-based programs has been called into question on the grounds that simply providing information without a skill-building component may not produce changes in behaviour (e.g., Kramer et al., 1998). For example, Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) point out some of the limitations of passive approaches to parenting interventions, including the fact that there is no guarantee that parents read the material received in the program, and that there is a lack of modelling behaviour and opportunities to practise skills. The authors also state that simply receiving information or watching an emotionally-laden video outlining the impact of divorce on children rarely leads to behaviour change in the absence of behaviour training.

As outlined in the introductory sections of this chapter, given the time restraints of short-term programs, most tend to be limited to an information-giving approach, with some rare exceptions (examples from Table 1 include programs reviewed by Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996a, 1997; McKenry, Clark & Stone, 1999;
Pedro-Carroll et al., 2001). Thus, programs with an information-provision focus tend to outweigh those with a skill-building focus.

The predominance of information-based programs means that parents are not often given the opportunity to practise and develop specific communication and parenting skills within the group context. Further, the lesser availability of skills-based programs has implications, as those that incorporate a skill-building component appear to produce more favourable outcomes than those based primarily on information provision. For example, Bacon and McKenzie (2004), in their evaluative review of Canadian PSPPs, found that skills-based programs, which also tended to be longer, were linked to more positive changes in cooperative parenting and reduced conflict than information-based programs. Arbuthnot et al. (1997) also found that, as a result of a skills-based intervention, separating parents were shown to increase their ability to choose conflict-lowering communication behaviours, and these effects were maintained at six-month follow-up.

As Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) point out, learning and behaviour change are more likely to result in response to active engagement and the teaching of specific solutions to problems. Thus, according to the research to date coupled with the evidence presented in the Table 1 review, it appears that skills-oriented programs are more likely to lead to parental behaviour change than more passive information-giving approaches. However, the issue remains to be assessed more extensively through further direct comparisons of the efficacy of active versus passive programs.

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1 NB: Those short-term programs that do incorporate a skills-building component are often more extended in length than the average short-term program, sometimes verging on classification as a ‘long-term’ program. For example, the Assisting Children Through the Transition program, reviewed by Pedro-Carroll et al. (2001), is of 7 hours duration, which is noticeably more extensive than other programs falling under the short-term program classification.
It is important to note that evidence-based programs of this nature are currently limited in Australia (Burke, McIntosh & Gridley, 2007).

The next sections will further discuss the evaluation research in relation to program length and format with reference to the ability of programs to produce effects on the outcome domains derived by Fackrell et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis of PSPP evaluation research. These domains include the primary outcome domain of interparental conflict, and the secondary domains of child adjustment, parent adjustment, and the parent-child relationship. While Fackrell et al. also included relitigation rates as an outcome domain, this was considered an imprecise indication of program effectiveness for the reasons outlined previously, thus relitigation rates were not included as an outcome domain in the current program review.

Given that short-term programs are generally information-based in format, and programs of longer duration tend to be skills-based in nature, the following sections will review these two types of program structures separately. Thus, the impact of short-term, information-based programs on the outcome domains will be explored first, followed by a discussion of long-term, skills-based programs in relation to the same domains.

2.4.2 Review of Short-Term, Information-Based Programs.

2.4.2.1 Short-term, information-based programs and interparental conflict. There has been mixed findings in the literature for the ability of short term, information-based programs to impact the domain of interparental conflict specifically. Some studies do report improvements in conflict levels. For example, one short-term, information-based program, *Children First*, has been the subject of two separate evaluative studies by Kramer and colleagues (i.e., Kramer & Washo,
In the 1993 evaluation, participants in the program were not found initially to report lower levels of conflict than the control group at the post-assessment point; however, results for both the initial study and follow-up analyses did suggest that those who could be classified as high-conflict families may indeed have benefited from the program. Another short-term, information-based program, Kids in Divorce and Separation, was evaluated by Shifflett and Cummings (1999), who carried out a particularly thorough evaluation of the dimensions of interparental conflict, including frequency, content and resolution, parent’s own and their partner’s conflict behaviours, and children’s exposure to the conflict. Significant differences were found between the treatment and control group in relation to parents’ reported understanding of conflict and its impact on children, as well as their own and their partner’s reduced engagement in negative conflict behaviours; however, it is difficult to confidently accept the study findings due to large differences between the groups at baseline. Another study reviewing the short-term, information-based Utah Divorce Education Program by Criddle, Allgood and Piercy (2003) found that program attendance was associated with decreases in reported levels of interparental conflict. However, this study was also subject to some methodological limitations which make the results difficult to interpret, including the lack of a pre-intervention assessment for comparison and non-use of established outcome measures of conflict.

While some studies have produced some positive outcomes in relation to the interparental conflict domain, other studies report little to no change, or even increases in conflict levels after program attendance. For example, although interparental conflict was not measured in an evaluation of the long-term, skill-based version of the Parenting for Divorced Fathers program by Devlin et al. (1992), one measure of conflict was included in the evaluation of the short-term,
information-based version by Douglas (2004). No significant change results were found. Brandon (2006), in an evaluation of the short-term Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting program, found that while parents perceived that they were triangulating their children less in interparental conflict from post-assessment to follow-up, the level of interparental conflict overall was actually found to increase from pre-assessment to follow-up. However, the lack of a control group and the use of unstandardised measures in this study makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Another study evaluating the Families in Transition program assessed parent’s attitude changes and intentions to enact program-directed behaviours rather than providing an assessment of actual behaviour change (Yankeelov, Bledsoe, Brown & Cambron, 2003). Thus, while results were generally positive, this program cannot be said to have had an impact on actual conflict behaviours. Overall, therefore, while some empirical support exists for the effectiveness of information-based programs of short duration in influencing levels of interparental conflict, the evidence remains fairly limited at this stage.

2.4.2.2 Short-term, information-based programs and impact on child adjustment, parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship. While evidence for the ability of short-term, information-based programs to exert influence over interparental conflict levels is relatively scarce, the picture is similar regarding the impact of these programs on the secondary outcome domains of child adjustment, parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship. Thus, a review of the short-term, information-based program evaluation studies in Table 1 revealed that measures of child adjustment were extremely rare, with only one study assessing this domain overall. A non-significant result was found in the study that did include a measure of child adjustment. Thus, Kramer and colleagues, in their first evaluation of the
Children First program in 1993, found no significant improvement on children’s adjustment post-program, while the 1998 follow-up evaluation did not assess child adjustment at all.

Reflective of the results of the current review, Goodman et al. (2004) reviewed several short-term programs and found no significant differences between the treatment and comparison groups on levels of child adjustment in any of the programs. Thus, there is currently no empirical evidence in the literature to indicate that short-term parenting programs enhance the wellbeing of children post-divorce at this stage. The picture is similar in relation to the impact of short-term, information-based programs on the domains of parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship, with only two evaluation studies including assessments of these domains (Douglas, 2004; Kramer & Washo, 1993). However, no significant changes were found on either of the domains in these studies. It must be concluded, therefore, that evaluative studies to date have not demonstrated that short-term, information-based programs are influential in enhancing the adjustment outcomes of children or their parents, or improving the parent-child relationship post-separation and divorce.

2.4.2.3 Summary of the impact of short-term, information-based programs on the outcome domains. Overall, brief interventions focused solely on the provision of information do seem to receive positive consumer satisfaction reports and may be useful for increasing parental awareness in regards to the needs of children post-separation and motivating them to change their behaviour. However, evidence is lacking for the ability of shorter, information-based programs to produce definitive change on any of the post-separation outcome domains measured such as interparental conflict, child and parent adjustment, or the parent-child relationship. Programs comprising one or two sessions are particularly likely to be inadequate for
those couples displaying continuously high levels of conflict for years after separation.

2.4.3 Review of Long-Term, Skills-Based Programs. Evaluations of longer-term, skills-focused parenting programs tend to be more rigorous than evaluations of shorter-term, information-based programs. As is evident from the studies under review in Table 1, evaluative studies of these types of programs are more likely to employ a randomised experimental design to examine effects and often utilise different types of measures from multiple reporters as outcome variables in examining program results. However, as pointed out by Goodman et al. (2004), while evaluative studies of longer-term programs have been methodologically rigorous, they have mostly been carried out in research settings rather than under real-world conditions such as community organisations. Similar to the above review of short-term, information-based programs, below is an exploration of the impact of longer-term, skills-based programs on the primary outcome domain of interparental conflict, and the secondary domains of child adjustment, parent adjustment, and the parent-child relationship.

2.4.3.1 Long-term, skills-based programs and interparental conflict. As with research pertaining to short-term, information-focused programs, evaluations of longer-duration, skills-focused programs also commonly lack an adequate assessment of the program’s ability to affect interparental conflict, and those evaluations that have included a measure of interparental conflict have found mixed results. For example, an initial evaluation of the long-term, skills-based New Beginnings program found that program participation did not influence interparental conflict (Wolchik et al., 1993), while a second evaluation found that effects were
limited to high-conflict families only (Wolchik et al., 2000). An evaluation of another longer-term, skills-focused program by Cookston et al. (2006) did examine program effects in relation to the frequency, intensity and resolution of interparental conflict, and found promising results. Specifically, the *Dads for Life* intervention program for divorced fathers was shown to significantly reduce interparental conflict post-treatment. Further, the substantial reductions in conflict were reported by both mothers and fathers, despite the fact that only fathers attended the program.

Cookston and Fung’s (2011) evaluation of the long-term, skills-based *Kids Turn* program also yielded positive outcomes in relation to the conflict domain, with significant decreases found on several measures of interparental conflict, including the frequency and intensity of conflict, and conflict breadth (i.e., number of topics disagreed upon). However, the limitations of sample size and lack of a control group in this study must be noted before firm conclusions can be drawn in relation to program effectiveness. Another long-term evaluation study of the *Parenting and Divorce Program* by Whitehurst, O’Keefe and Wilson (2008) did not measure conflict directly, but a post-program reduction in relitigation rates was taken as evidence of reduced interparental conflict, though the same caution must be applied in the interpretation of the relationship between conflictual coparenting relationships and relitigation rates as noted earlier. In reviewing the *Orientation for Divorcing Parents* program, Buehler et al. (1992) included an informal measure of interparental conflict, but did not report significant change results on this domain, which the authors speculate may have been due to large differences between the groups on conflict at baseline due to self-selection of participants into either the intervention or control condition. Unfortunately, the other long-term program evaluation studies reviewed in Table 1 did not include a direct measure of interparental conflict (i.e., Devlin et al., 1992; Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999, 2001; Laufer & Berman, 2006),
thus, the effectiveness of these programs on this outcome domain cannot be ascertained. Overall, therefore, while the effect that long-term, skills-based PSPPs have on interparental conflict still remains somewhat unclear, findings at this stage generally appear more promising than those for shorter-term, information-based programs.

2.4.3.2 Long-term, skills-based programs and impact on child adjustment, parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship. In addition to the somewhat encouraging results of longer-term programs on interparental conflict, programs of longer duration also appear to have some benefits in relation to the domains of child adjustment, parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship. Illustratively, positive results were reported in relation to child adjustment in an evaluation of the New Beginnings intervention, which found the program to improve children’s internalising and externalising problems, with benefits in relation to externalising problems being maintained at six-year follow-up (Wolchik et al., 2000, 2002). Importantly, prevalence rates of diagnosed mental disorder were reduced by 46% six years later in the group whose mothers attended the program compared to the comparison group. This study also found positive program effects in relation to mother-child relationship quality, discipline, and support of the father-child relationship at post-assessment. Notably, however, participation in this program is limited to mothers only, thus the findings cannot be generalised to parents of both genders.

Forgatch and DeGarmo conducted a 1999 and follow-up 2001 evaluation study of the Parenting Through Change program in which they employed a notably strong multiple-informant, multiple-method assessment design. Improvements in child adjustment were reported and path models also demonstrated that the intervention was associated with improved parenting practices, which in turn
predicted improved child adjustment (though these benefits were not observable until after the first year). Better school adjustment was also reported by teachers. This study, however, did not include assessments of parent adjustment or the parent-child relationship.

Another long-term, skills-based program evaluation found encouraging results in relation to child and parent adjustment. Thus, Cookston and Fung (2011) in evaluating the Kids’ Turn program, found a significant decrease in both children’s parent-reported internalising behaviours (anxiety and depression), and parent’s own levels of depression and anxiety following completion of the program. While measures of the parent-child relationship were included in the program review, no significant changes were found on this domain.

Devlin et al. (1992), in their evaluation of the Parenting for Divorced Fathers program, assessed the parent-child relationship, and reported significant improvements on this domain. However, the results are subject to some limitations such as small sample size and a significant difference in average age between children in the intervention condition compared to those in the control condition, which must be accounted for in interpreting the findings. The study did not contain assessments of child adjustment or parent adjustment. Buehler et al. (1992) did measure child and parent adjustment in their review of the Orientation for Divorcing Parents program, though did not find significant improvements on these indices. The remaining evaluations of the long-term, skills-based Dads for Life (Cookston et al., 2006), Cooperative Parenting and Divorce Program (Whitehurst, O’Keefe & Wilson, 2008), and the Parent Education Program (Laufer & Berman, 2006), did not include assessments of child adjustment, parent adjustment or the parent-child relationship, thus their impact on these outcome domains remains unknown.
2.4.3.3 Summary of the impact of long-term, skills-based programs on the outcome domains. Programs of longer duration with a skill-building focus not only appear to hold more promise than short-term, information-focused programs in affecting change on the primary domain of interparental conflict, but also appear to have some benefits in relation to the secondary domains of child adjustment, parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship post-divorce.

2.4.4 Targeted Participants. As noted earlier, programs may differ in their targeted participants, with some aimed at the general divorcing population (i.e., universal programs) and others aimed at separating or divorcing couples in high conflict specifically (i.e., targeted programs). To date, there has been limited research ascertaining the utility of targeted programs, with all of the evaluations included in the current review focusing on those that are geared towards the general post-separation population. Two studies presented in Table 1 reviewed a universal program (Children First) and reported encouraging results for participants in high-conflict ex-partner relationships particularly. Thus, Kramer and Washo (1993) found improvement at follow-up for high-conflict couples only on a measure of coparenting behaviour, suggesting that the program may be most suitable for those in more hostile coparenting relationships. Similar results were found in another evaluation of the same program by Kramer and Kowal in 1998, who found that relitigation rates were lower in those parents reporting higher conflict levels and triangulation behaviours, and lower levels of adaptive parenting. Findings such as these signal a need for programs targeting high-conflict couples in future, as well as research evaluating their utility.
2.5 Summary of PSPPs

In summary, PSPPs are becoming increasingly widespread across Western societies, however research establishing their effectiveness is at a preliminary stage with relatively few being documented or evaluated in the literature. While parents and court officials generally report high levels of satisfaction with these interventions, more rigorous evaluations of programs have been relatively limited. Notably, those programs that have been more extensively evaluated have produced some promising results. Thus, evaluation studies of the Parenting Through Change and New Beginnings programs (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Wolchik et al., 2000, 2002) have been particularly well-controlled studies demonstrating methodological rigour and have produced strong evidence in favour of longer term, skills-based programs particularly. Other research in this field has been plagued by some methodological limitations, and the effectiveness of most currently-running programs requires further clarification. However, the evidence to date tends to support the findings of the Forgatch and DeGarmo (1999) and Wolchik et al (2000, 2002) evaluations; namely, that skills-based, longer-duration programs appear to exert more influence than short-term, information-based programs in relation to the domains of interparental conflict and child adjustment. These programs also appear to have some utility in relation to parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship, though assessments of these outcome domains have been more limited in research to date.

The findings of the current review are in line with the outcome of a recent meta-analytic review of court-connected programs conducted by Fackrell, Hawkins and Kay (2011), who found a significant moderate positive effect across studies comparing an intervention group with a no-treatment control group, so that those
who participated in a program were 50% better off on the outcome domains than those who did not participate. Thus, overall, despite the fact that evaluations of PSPPs have tended to lag behind their implementation into communities across Western nations, the results that evaluation research has thus far yielded suggest that PSPPs are a viable method of education for parents following separation and divorce, with the ultimate aim of enhancing the adjustment of their children in the wake of this disruptive and distressing life event.

2.6 The Present Study

While researchers have identified some of the key elements of post-separation parenting programs (PSPPs) that appear to contribute to program effectiveness, such as length and format, this research has been conducted predominantly on programs within the United States. In Australia, however, there has been little controlled evaluation of PSPPs. Given the increasing attendance at PSPPs across Australia, extensive evaluative studies are required to inform the development and dissemination of Australian programs that are effective in enhancing parental relations, thereby reducing the impact of interparental conflict on children. Thus, this is a key aim of the current research.

The present study involves the development, implementation and evaluation of the Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program (FMC PSPP; described in Chapter 3), a comprehensive and scientifically rigorous manualised post-separation parenting program implemented in Victoria. The program is both preventive and interventive in nature. Thus, a key aim is to prevent the detrimental effects of interparental conflict on children’s adjustment, and more distally, enhance parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship. The program is interventive in
that it addresses issues currently affecting separating and divorcing families such as interparental conflict, coparenting and adjustment issues.

The content of the program is informed by the literature on the relationships between parental separation and divorce, interparental conflict, and child adjustment, and on the evaluations of existing programs and materials reviewed in this thesis. Its development and construction involved utilising several of the existing Family Mediation Centre resources and adapting resources from established programs, and synthesising information into a standardised manual form. Elements of existing programs that have been identified in this literature review as effective in reducing interparental conflict and its impact on children, improving the parent-child relationship, and enhancing parental and child adjustment have been incorporated into the design of the program. Thus, in accordance with effectiveness research, the current program is skills-based in design and, in line with the findings on the superiority of longer-duration programs, is structured into a series of two-hour sessions extending over eight weeks. In relation to the targeted participants of the program, research has identified a need for programs aimed at high-conflict couples (Kramer & Kowal, 1998; Kramer & Washo, 1993), thus the program is designed to target those parents in highly conflictual coparenting relationships. In terms of gender, there is currently no research favouring program effectiveness with mothers-only versus fathers-only participants, so the proposed program is aimed at both parents, though it is recommended that ex-partners attend separately given the persisting conflict between them, in line with previous recommendations (e.g., Laufer & Berman, 2006). In order to ensure the content validity of the program, experts in the field were asked to review its content following the design phase.

Following implementation of the program into various Melbourne branches of the Family Mediation Centre, the program evaluation will assess its effectiveness
in relation to the key domains of parent and child adjustment and the parent-child relationship, and will also involve a thorough assessment of the different dimensions of interparental conflict, given the multidimensional nature of conflict established in the literature and its impact on child adjustment discussed in Chapter 1. These domains reflect the outcome domains recommended by Cookston, Braver, Sandler, and Genalo (2002) in PSPP evaluation research, and match the outcome categories used by Fackrell et al. (2011) in their meta-analytic review of program effectiveness, with the exception of relitigation rates. Relitigation is a somewhat imprecise indication of program effectiveness (as outlined in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter), thus is not included as an outcome domain in the present study. The development, implementation and evaluation of the FMC PSPP are presented in detail across Chapters 3 to 6 of this thesis.

2.6.1 Hypotheses. In accordance with the aims of the program and the measured outcome domains, it was hypothesised that those participants who completed the eight-week manualised FMC PSPP across Victorian sites of the Family Mediation Centre would, at the completion of the active phase of the intervention and at 3-month follow-up, report: (i) a significant decrease in the frequency of interparental conflict and in the destructive conflict dimensions (i.e., intensity, avoiding, attacking, poor resolution and coparenting conflict), and a significant increase in the more constructive aspects of interparental conflict (i.e., compromising); (ii) significant improvements in (a) general psychological adjustment and (b) separation-specific parent adjustment; (iii) significantly improved parent-reported child adjustment; and (iv) significant improvements in parent-child relationships. Comparatively, it was hypothesized that those in the waitlist control group would report no significant changes across these domains over time.
CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FAMILY MEDIATION CENTRE POST-SEPARATION PARENTING PROGRAM MANUAL

3.1 Overview

The Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program (FMC PSPP) manual (Appendix C) was developed in accordance with the parental separation and divorce literature reviewed in the introductory chapters of this thesis. Accordingly, the program was designed to extend over 8 weekly 2-hour sessions, and was skills-based in nature, thus the program focused on developing skills related to parenting rather than attempting to change attitudes and behaviour simply via information provision. Throughout the manual development and implementation process, meetings were held in consultation with Family Mediation Centre program facilitators and key stakeholders to discuss the content and delivery of the manual as it was the intention of the researchers to engage in a collaborative approach with FMC staff at the stage of manual development. While the importance of covering the manual content was emphasised, it was suggested that the delivery of the content was open to some flexibility and facilitator autonomy was encouraged in keeping with research outlining the importance of integrating flexibility within a treatment manual (e.g., Addis et al, 1999; Duncan, 2004; Kendall, 1998, 2000; Wilson, 1996). Thus, facilitators were informed that adoption of a rigid, linear approach to the manual content was not necessary for effective delivery of the program, provided that the essential components of the manual were covered within the program.

Each session of the program is focused on specific themes pertaining to relationship separation including parental and child adjustment throughout the
separation process, the impact and management of interparental conflict, relationships with children and the other parent, interparental and parent-child communication, the discipline of children, legal and financial issues, and moving on. In addressing these key areas, the content of the manual incorporates didactic and experiential components including psychoeducation in relation to separation issues, group sharing of experiences and discussion of materials, and skill development through group activities and exercises and homework tasks. Handouts are provided as a reference point for participants, both during the sessions and for reflection post-session and in the future.

Sessions are generally designed to follow a similar structure week-to-week, commencing with the setting of an agenda and an introduction to the week’s topic, followed by group discussion and activities relating to the week’s topic, and concluding with session summaries and the setting of homework for the week. Homework is emphasised as an important opportunity to reflect on and put into action material that has been learned in sessions, and may also be utilised as a tool to prepare participants for upcoming topics in sessions ahead. A debriefing form is provided for facilitators to fill in and discuss at the conclusion of each session, where facilitators are encouraged to note down the participants in attendance, activities completed, any concerns they may have had in relation to the program content, and any concerns regarding individual participants and a plan of action for managing these concerns. The manual content is discussed in greater detail in the section below, and the complete treatment manual may be referred to in the Appendices.

3.2 Program Content

3.2.1 Introduction and program preparation. This initial chapter of the manual contains introductory and preparatory notes for the benefit of the program
facilitators, commencing with some introductory paragraphs that provide a brief overview of the program. A rationale for the manual is provided in the overview, explaining that the need to develop a manualised treatment program stems from the recent increased popularity of PSPGs, which has in turn facilitated the need for standardised programs that have proven efficacy based on research. The principle of self-directed learning is then introduced as the modus operandi of the program. This principle is based on the concept that the individual is responsible for their own learning and development in order to produce change, with an emphasis on self-change rather than attempts to change others. The overview paragraphs conclude by outlining that the aim of the program is to reduce conflict associated with relationship separation and to decrease the negative effects of conflict on children.

Some notes on the application of the manual are provided in the next section of the introductory chapter titled *Applying the Manual*, where the emphasis is on the autonomy of the facilitators in delivering its contents flexibly in accordance with previous research (Addis et al., 1999; Duncan, 2004; Kendall, 1998, 2000; Wilson, 1996). In the next section titled *Preparation for a Program*, the advertising and marketing of the program to assist recruitment of participants is discussed, and PSPG brochures are provided for photocopying and distribution. The next subsection, titled *Assessment of Participant Suitability* outlines the process of assessing suitability of potential participants prior to enrolment in the program. Eligibility and exclusion criteria are provided for facilitators to make this assessment. Procedures and recommendations for handling both those participants deemed eligible to participate, and those deemed ineligible, are outlined. Those who are deemed eligible and who have provided consent to participate are sent introductory information and research questionnaires. It is suggested that those who have been deemed ineligible to attend prior to the program commencing be provided with some initial one-on-one
counselling to help them prepare for possible participation in the course at a later date. For those clients displaying difficult behaviour throughout the program, it is suggested that facilitators either disallow the participant to attend any future sessions of the program, or otherwise work with them between sessions to facilitate more appropriate behaviour in future sessions.

The next subsection under Preparation for a Program is titled Group Size and Format, and specifies 8 to 10 participants as the optimal number of participants in each group, allowing for the breaking up of the group into smaller groups to facilitate skills acquisition and promote social interaction among group members, as suggested by Arbuthnot and Gordon (2001). Eight 2-hour sessions are stipulated as the number of sessions required to cover all of the content and to keep participants engaged according to FMC experience and previous research on post-separation parenting programs, which recommends sufficient time to allow for the development and mastery of the skills imparted in the program (Davidoff & Schiller, 1983; Goodman, Bonds, Sandler & Braver, 2004). In the subsection following, titled Facilitator Roles and Group Process, it is recommended that two facilitators, preferably one of each gender, run each group. Prior to the commencement of each program, it is suggested that facilitators discuss their expectations as to the process of the group (how the group will run, facilitator roles etc) and to operationalise the delivery of the information prior to the commencement of the program. Facilitators are encouraged to tailor the running of the program according to the number of participants, the group dynamics and facilitator preference. An optional proforma to map session outlines is provided on page 10 of the manual as an aid to program planning. It is also highlighted in this subsection that participants are given several handouts throughout the course, and it is therefore suggested that a folder is created.
for each participant in which to file these handouts. A title page for these folders is attached.

In the next section, titled *The Importance of Research*, a rationale for the current research evaluating the manual is provided as well as an outline of the current study and the obtainment of evaluation questionnaires at the pre, post and 3-month follow-up points.

3.2.2 Session 1: Introduction to the program, goals, and impact of interparental conflict on children. Session 1 of the program aims to provide participants with an overview and introduction to the structure, guidelines and expectations of the course. To commence the first session, participants are provided with a name tag as they enter reception or the conference room, and there is an emphasis on commencing the session on time to set the standard of punctuality for the course. Participants are welcomed and facilitators introduce themselves, then participants are informed that each session of the course will commence with the setting of an agenda for the evening. The agenda for Session 1 is then provided to participants. The first item on the agenda, *Housekeeping*, involves providing participants with details as to the length of the course and sessions, payment of fees, location of bathrooms, break times, the importance of punctuality etc. Under the next agenda item, *Participant Introductions*, participants are asked to share their own name, names and ages of their children and a brief summary of their reasons for attending the program. Facilitators then summarise these reasons and point out areas of convergence and divergence among the participants. As an introductory exercise and to promote cohesion among the group, it is suggested that facilitators then complete the *Family Tree Exercise* (as adapted by Wolchik, 1993), where a tree is sketched on the whiteboard and the name of each participant is written on one of the
branches of the tree with their children’s names stemming from the branch. ‘PSPG’ is written on the trunk of the tree, and facilitators’ names are placed on the roots.

The guidelines of the program are the next item on the agenda. To promote a sense of unity and democracy among the group, it is recommended that facilitators hold a discussion with the participants in relation to what the guidelines for the group will be. The guidelines are to be written on the whiteboard and a copy made and distributed to each participant. A set of example guidelines are provided in the manual, and it is advised that discussion with participants should aim to elicit most of these guidelines. Examples include confidentiality, respect for all members, punctuality and listening to each other without interrupting.

Expectations of participants is the next item on the agenda to be addressed in Session 1. It is suggested that facilitators write the heading ‘Great Expectations’ on the whiteboard, ask participants what they hope to achieve in attending the program, and write their responses under this heading. A list of potential responses are included in the manual as examples and to stimulate discussion. Facilitators are encouraged during this activity to normalise some of the feelings participants may express in relation to separation difficulties. This section is summed up with facilitators communicating that an essential purpose of the group is to help children adjust to parental separation, and that the way this is achieved is through working to meet some of the aforementioned expectations.

The next item on the Session 1 agenda is titled Introducing the Impact of Conflict on Children, where it is pointed out that reducing conflict between former partners for the benefit of their children is perhaps the most important aim of the program. The impact of interparental conflict on children is communicated by facilitators to the group as follows:
“Children are very sensitive to conflict between their parents, and they can be badly affected by conflict which continues after separation. Research shows quite clearly that conflict between parents is the most critical factor which affects children's adjustment after separation. Children who feel that they are 'the meat in the sandwich' are the ones who are the most seriously affected by the conflict. If the conflict between parents continues, children may become distressed every time they go from one parent to the other. They may feel pressure to take sides. They may have ongoing problems at school, and, at worst, their development may be seriously hampered. Children who witness intense conflict or violence between parents are at risk of developing long-term emotional problems. The effect on children of seeing or hearing a parent being hurt is similar to the child being hurt themselves.”

Participants are assured by facilitators at the end of this section of the program that ways to manage and reduce interparental conflict will be addressed throughout the course.

The next item on the Session 1 agenda provides participants with an outline of the course, whereby each participant is provided with a Course Outline handout and invited to provide their feedback on the course structure. In order to facilitate a collaborative, ‘working together’ approach, participants and facilitators are encouraged to discuss as a team whether any changes could be made to the course structure to accommodate and address more adequately the group’s needs, i.e. whether some topics may be moved to a different session or focused on more (or less) extensively etc. This is designed to be done with reference to the group expectations discussed previously in order to meet these expectations effectively and constructively.
In the next section of Session 1, *Children’s Reactions to Separation*, participants are invited to share some of their thoughts in relation to some of the changes and/or losses their children have experienced as a consequence of parental separation, and also some of the concerns and reactions children have had in response to their parents separating. Facilitators write these responses in two columns on the board. Some example responses are provided to initiate discussion if required (e.g., moving schools, fears of abandonment, gaining a new step-parent etc). Facilitators are suggested to discuss how the issues in the two columns may be related, and to point out that children often misbehave in response to these issues due to coping mechanisms that are lesser developed than those of (most) adults. Participants are invited to share whether they have noticed any changes in their children since separation. It is suggested that facilitators normalise participants’ responses to this question, but at the same time emphasise the importance of parental attendance to these issues. A handout, *How Children React to Separation*, describes some of the emotions, questions, behaviours and reactions of children to parental separation at different ages and stages of development, and is provided to participants as a reference point. This information was sourced from the *Child and Youth Health* (2007) website, which is an Australian website providing resources to parents regarding child development.

For the next item on the session agenda, *My Child’s Rights in Relation to the Separation*, facilitators ask the group what they think may be their children’s rights in relation to the separation, and responses are written on the whiteboard. Some examples are provided in the manual (such as ‘the right to express how they feel and have a voice’, ‘to not have to choose between Mum and Dad’ etc.). Facilitators then express to the group that part of the program is about ensuring that these rights of children in relation to separation are honoured and maintained.
In the next part of the session, participants watch the DVD resource *Consider the Children* (obtained from the *Children in Focus* research program, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia). This DVD highlights the experience of separation and divorce for children, with a focus on the impact of interparental conflict. Participants are then provided with the *Children - Thinking, Feeling, Hearing* handout, which provides information on some of the misconceptions and faulty beliefs children can often hold during a separation, the things children need to know and guidelines as to what parents should and should not say to children in relation to the separation.

In the next part of the session, *Solutions to Separation Problems for Children*, a list of strategies are provided in relation to managing some of the problems children face after separation, and participants are informed that the program will be geared towards solving separation problems for children by helping parents adopt these strategies, which involve: increasing positive and warm contact between parents and their children; keeping children out of the ‘war zone’ of divorce; supporting relationships with the other parent; improving parenting and discipline skills, and; aiming for consistency in relation to these changes, i.e. maintaining stability (Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian & Montes, 2001; Wolchik et al., 1993, 2000).

Providing homework is the next item on the agenda. The importance of completing homework throughout the program is emphasised to participants, who are then provided with Session 1 homework handouts and informed that their homework will be discussed at the next session. The first homework handout provided for Session 1 is the *Help For Children of Any Age* worksheet, which requires participants to check on a list the ways in which they are currently helping their children adjust to separation, and to then highlight those strategies they would
like to work on and use more in the future. This worksheet was adapted from an online resource provided by the *British Columbia Ministry of Justice* (2007) website, which provides resources in relation to parenting after separation or divorce via the *Family Justice* link.

The second homework handout for Session 1, *Goals and Expectations*, asks participants to list some goals they would like to achieve by the end of the program, and their expectations that the program will help them actually achieve these goals. Both the homework worksheets are designed to facilitate reflection on how participants and their children are currently managing the separation, and the changes they would like to see by the end of the program.

3.2.3 **Session 2: Impact of relationship dissolution on separating individuals.** Session 2 of the program aims to normalise and provide information about the potential impact of relationship separation on the adjustment of separating individuals, and to provide participants with some tools for managing and coping with some of the negative effects of the experience. The session commences with an introduction to the agenda items for the session, and a brief introduction to the session topic, followed by a reiteration of the group guidelines discussed in the previous week. Homework is reviewed with participants, who are invited to share some of their program goals and expectations and any areas of strength or areas for improvement identified through the homework tasks. It is suggested that facilitators photocopy participant’s completed *Goals and Expectations* worksheets for reference at the completion of the program to assess whether these goals and expectations have been met or require further attention.

In the next section, *What is Separation Adjustment and How Are You Adjusting?*, the concept of separation adjustment as a process is introduced to
participants. This section opens with a discussion of the specific challenges of separation, such as lingering attachment to the former partner, negotiating parenting arrangements, managing relationships with children and coping with negative emotional states. Areas of convergence and divergence between relationship separation and other stressors (e.g., losing a job or the death of a loved one) is then discussed, as are similarities and differences with the grief process. It is suggested that facilitators present participants with an overhead slide (Adjustment Changes Over Time) presenting the typical trajectory of adjustment to the different aspects of relationship separation. An optional handout (Plot Your Own Separation Adjustment) may also be given to participants at this point, whereby participants plot their own adjustment to the different challenges of relationship separation over time, and identify areas they feel require improvement, and how they may address this. Facilitators are suggested to point out that while aspects such as attachment to the former partner and loneliness/negative emotions and the parent-child relationship tend to improve over time, interparental conflict generally does not appear to ameliorate with time in the same way. For this reason, it is important to learn new ways of interacting with the former partner, and this will be a focus throughout the remainder of the course.

In the next section of the session, Social Support, the importance of support from friends and family throughout the separation process is emphasised as a vital coping tool. This section commences with facilitators asking the group to give examples of some changes they are working through as a result of the separation, then emphasising that support in managing these changes comes in different forms. Three forms of support — resource support, emotional support and financial support — are written on the whiteboard along with their descriptions. Participants are then provided with the Getting Support handout which asks them to think about the type
of support they need and who it is that provides them with the various types of support. Participants are recommended not to seek emotional support from their children. Rather, they are encouraged to seek support from adult friends and family so as not to burden their children with these issues.

Relaxation is the subject of the next part of the session. The topic of relaxation is introduced to participants as an important and beneficial skill when executing some of the other skills taught in the course (e.g., parenting techniques and anger management), and the benefits are briefly discussed. Facilitators then ask the group to identify signs that they need to relax, and write the responses under three headings: (1) Physiological Response; (2) Emotional Response, and; (3) Cognitive Response. Participants are then informed that relaxation is a skill, and benefits become greater with practise.

Next, facilitators go through a progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) exercise by physiologist Edmund Jacobson with the group. PMR has been shown to be particularly effective in the management of anxiety and stress symptomatology. Illustratively, Grawe, Donati and Bernauer, in a comprehensive meta-analytic study reporting on the effectiveness of all available psychotherapies carried out in 2001, found that progressive muscle relaxation led to significantly positive changes in 80% of individuals with a primary diagnosis of anxiety disorder and/or symptoms of tension and stress. Once participants have completed the exercise, they are asked to report how they feel and to notice whether any symptoms of tension, stress or anxiety have lessened. Participants are then informed where they can borrow or buy similar guided relaxation resources (i.e. online, bookshops and local libraries) and are recommended to obtain these for practise.
For homework, participants are given the *War Zone Experiences* and the *Rapid Relaxation* worksheets, and asked to complete them before the next session. The *War Zone Experiences* worksheet asks participants to circle some of the conflictual experiences they may have been involved with over the last couple of months that their children may have considered distressing in some way. This is intended to promote awareness in participants in relation to some of the ways in which they may be communicating and managing their relationship with their former partner that may not be in the best interests of their children and therefore require addressing throughout the program. The *Rapid Relaxation* worksheet outlines the benefits of being able to relax quickly in response to stressful everyday events. Rapid relaxation instructions are provided, and participants are recommended to practise this skill at least twice per day, and in response to stressful or anger-producing situations. It is also suggested that participants practise the extended version of relaxation using a guided tape in conjunction with the rapid version to achieve fuller benefits. The worksheet asks participants to consider situations in which rapid relaxation might prove useful. The session is completed with facilitators recapping the evening’s content, and flagging the content that will be covered in the next session.

### 3.2.4 Session 3: Managing relationships with former partners, Part 1 - parenting styles, conflict, anger management, assertion and problem-solving.

Session 3 introduces participants to some of the aspects of managing their relationship with their former partner, including the coparenting of children and effective communication. The session commences with an outline of the session agenda, and goes on to review participants’ homework. In reviewing the homework, the group is asked to provide examples of situations in which they practised rapid relaxation and whether they found it beneficial. Participants are also asked whether
the War Zone Experiences worksheet helped them to identify problem areas that they would like to improve.

After the homework review, participants are given the Parenting After Separation handout, which describes three post-separation parenting relationship styles (i.e. cooperative parenting, parallel parenting and conflictual parenting), and asked to identify which style best characterises their coparenting relationship with their former partner, which style they would like to be, and what would need to happen to achieve this. In the context of this activity, it is suggested that facilitators reiterate the detrimental impact on children who witness ongoing parental conflict, and the consequent importance of reducing this conflict. In the following part of the session, Reducing the Conflict, facilitators next provide participants with the Reduce the Conflict handout, which provides suggestions for managing communication and coparenting with the former partner, and things to avoid when feeling upset. Questions for group discussion in relation to conflict are suggested, such as: ‘How do your children respond when caught in the war zone?’, ‘What gets in the way of you communicating effectively with your ex-partner? What can you do about it?’ and ‘Identify when you are most likely to have conflict’.

In the next part of the session, Anger Management and Assertion, participants are provided with the Anger Management and the Assertive Behaviour handouts. The Anger Management handout introduces the idea of using self-coping statements in the preparation and management of anger-producing and stressful situations. Some self-coping statements are provided (eg ‘I will be able to handle this as long as I stay relaxed and calm’), and it is then suggested that participants come up with some of their own and write them down on the worksheet for future reference. The Assertive Behaviour handout provides a definition of assertion, outlines what does and does
not constitute assertive behaviour, and discusses some of the outcomes of being assertive (i.e. ‘using assertion does not mean getting your own way’, and ‘if you apply assertion after weighing up the pros and cons of a given situation, people will respect you’). The worksheet then recommends using ‘I’ statements and including the elements of behaviour, feelings and effect when being assertive, and asks participants to devise their own assertive response that incorporates these elements. It is suggested that facilitators point out the benefits of being assertive with other individuals aside from the former partner, such as relatives or friends who badmouth the former partner in front of their children. An example of an assertive response in relation to this situation is then provided.

In the next section of the session, participants are given the opportunity to learn and practice some fundamental problem-solving skills. The skills are designed to be used by parents to prevent the escalation of conflict around separation and parenting issues by promoting a sense of cooperation and teamwork between both parties. Alternatively, the skills may be used by participants individually to produce effective solutions to their own problems. While there are various versions of the social information-processing model available in the literature (e.g., Adams & Baronberg, 2004; Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1998; Shure, 1992), all of these typically emphasise the following basic steps: (1) identifying and defining the problem; (2) brainstorming possible solutions; (3) evaluating proposed solutions; (4) deciding on a solution (5) developing a plan of action and and carrying it out; and (6) evaluating the outcome of the solution to determine if it is successful. Thus, the problem-solving skills in the current program are based on these six steps. Facilitators are suggested to introduce the steps to participants, provide them with the Problem
Solving worksheet and invite them to utilise the worksheet in problem-solving a parenting issue relevant to them.

For this week’s homework, the group is asked to complete the Strategies to Improve My Parenting Relationship with My Ex-Partner worksheet activity, whereby participants are required to note down any strategies they implement in relation to managing the coparenting relationship over the following week, outline the outcome of these strategies, and rate the strategies for their successfulness on a scale of 1 to 10 with a brief explanation of why they think the strategy was successful or not. In choosing strategies to utilise over the week, participants are encouraged to incorporate the tips for reducing conflict, anger management assertion and problem-solving techniques discussed in today’s session.

3.2.5 Session 4: Managing relationships with former partners, Part 2 - parenting coalitions, troubleshooting, and supporting children’s relationship with the other parent. Session 4 builds on the material covered in Session 3, and again focuses on helping participants manage their relationship with their former partner. To commence, the session agenda is presented, and homework is reviewed. As part of the homework review, participants are asked to provide feedback on their use of any conflict reduction, anger management and assertion techniques practised over the week in the context of interacting with their former partner.

Next, the concept of a collaborative coparenting arrangement is introduced to the group, which describes a cooperative, business-like coparenting arrangement between two parents. A handout, Building a Collaborative Co-Parenting Relationship (as adapted from the ‘Parenting Coalition’ handout from the Child Support Agency’s [2000] Back on Track Program), is provided to participants and discussed as a group. This worksheet outlines some of the benefits of collaborative
coparenting relationships, and provides some tips for creating this sort of relationship between former partners. In the following section of the session, *Troubleshooting Impediments to Collaborative Co-Parenting*, with the aid of an overhead titled *Common Impediments to Collaborative Co-Parenting*, facilitators invite discussion around the effect of certain factors (such as passing messages through the children, conflict at change-over time and children’s hearsay) on the fostering of a collaborative coparenting relationship between former partners. Participants are then provided with the *Fostering a Collaborative Co-Parenting Relationship* handout, which provides tips for managing the aforementioned obstacles to collaborative coparenting, and these tips are discussed as a group.

In the following section of the session, *Supporting my Child’s Relationship with the Other Parent*, the importance of promoting children’s relationships with their other parent is emphasised, which is aligned with research suggesting that children who have regular, ongoing contact with both parents after separation tend to fare best. Facilitators ask participants to think about the nature of their children’s relationship with their other parent prior to separation (whether they allowed the child time alone with them etc) and to compare how they currently support the relationship between their children and their other parent. The *Supporting My Child’s Relationship With Their Other Parent* handout is given to participants, which suggests and illustrates the use of a parenting calendar that outlines time spent with both parents. This activity is designed foster and promote respect for the relationship between participants’ children and their other parent. The next handout, *Are There Things That I Do That Restrict Their Relationship?*, encourages participants to think about things they are doing that may be impeding their children’s relationship with the other parent. Facilitators are given the option whether to gauge some responses to
this handout, but are cautioned that this topic may elicit some defensiveness from participants.

Finally, this week’s homework is provided to participants, which involves completing the *Improving the Parenting Relationship and Supporting Your Children* worksheet. This worksheet requires participants to create and put into action a plan for supporting the relationship between their children and the other parent, and to document the plan and outcome. Participants are also required to do the same regarding their own relationship with the other parent. The session is concluded with a summary of the topics covered over the last two weeks in relation to managing relationships with the former partner, and a brief overview of the focus of the next two sessions (i.e. parenting skills in relation to separation).

### 3.2.6 Session 5: Parenting skills, Part 1 - managing relationships with children.

Sessions 5 and 6 are dedicated to parenting skills in relation to separation. Many of the materials included in these sessions have been adapted from the *New Beginnings Parenting Program*, which has been rigorously evaluated and shown to have proven effectiveness across a range of separation adjustment outcomes for both parents and children (Wolchik et al., 1993, 2000). Session 5 specifically aims to convey information and advice in relation to enhancing participants’ relationships with their children using a variety of parenting strategies, while Session 6 provides information and guidelines in relation to disciplining children when faced with undesirable behaviour.

The current session commences with an overview of the session agenda and an introduction to the topic, then a homework review is carried out. In reviewing homework facilitators are recommended to elicit feedback in relation to the strategies participants adopted to foster their children’s and their own relationships with the
other parent, and to work through as a group any difficulties that arose in the context of this homework task.

In the next section of the session, the concept of Family Fun Time is introduced to the group, which involves setting aside set times to engage in fun family activities with children in order to increase positive, enjoyable contact between the parent and children. Participants are given the Family Fun Time handout, which provides some guidelines in relation to undertaking this activity (i.e. once per week, planned ahead of time, low-cost etc.), and space is provided for brainstorming some family fun time activities with children at home.

Next, the idea of One-On-One Time is introduced, which is an activity designed to help increase children’s self-esteem and meet some of their emotional needs. One-on-one time consists of regular, short periods of time in which parents give their full and exclusive positive attention to their child. Participants are provided with the One-on-One Time handout, which outlines some general guidelines for creating one-on-one time, and introduces the idea of ‘tailgating’, which consists of verbally commenting on a child’s actions as they undertake an activity with full positive acceptance of the activity (note: this is generally appropriate only for younger children). It is recommended that facilitators enact a one-on-one time session as a demonstration for the group, and to elicit responses from participants as to how the child is likely to feel during one-on-one time, and how the parent is likely to feel. Once one-on-one time has been explained and demonstrated, participants are asked to come up with some one-on-one time activities that could possibly be undertaken with their children. Facilitators are advised to spend some time troubleshooting any concerns regarding one-on-one time that participants may have. Concerns may be elicited by asking the group ‘what might get in the way of one-on-
one time?”. Some solutions to typical one-on-one time problems are provided and designed to be discussed with the group.

The next part of the session introduces the concept *Catch Them Being Good*, which is introduced as a useful parenting strategy that can often prevent an escalation trap from occurring. It is suggested facilitators explain the concept of an escalation trap to the group (i.e. the more children are yelled at, the naughtier they often become), and then provide them with the *Catch Them Being Good* handout, which defines the concept as rewarding children for their good behaviour and ignoring their bad behaviour. The handout provides some guidelines and examples and describes some of its benefits for parents and children.

The following part of the session, *Listening, Thinking and Responding*, focuses on communicating effectively with children. Participants are introduced to the key concepts by the facilitators, and provided with the *Engaging with Your Kids* handout, which introduces the *Listen, Think and Respond* concept. The *Thinking, Listening and Responding* overhead is displayed on the overhead projector, and the concepts are discussed as a group. The *Listen, Think, Respond* concept emphasises five skills for use when listening to children (‘Big Ears’, ‘Attentive Body Language’, ‘Good Openers’, ‘Mmm-Hmms’ and ‘Say Mores’), then encourages conscious thinking, or reflection, before providing a response that is tailored and appropriate to the child’s needs. The final part of the concept, ‘Respond’, encourages summarising what the child has said and trying to reflect the feelings the child is trying to communicate. A *Feelings Vocabulary* chart is provided to assist with this identification of emotions. Another important component to responding that is emphasised is guiding children to develop their own responses in order to promote a
sense of mastery and confidence within the child. Some tips are provided on how to achieve this.

Once these concepts have been introduced and discussed as a group using the handouts and overhead, it is suggested that some activities are undertaken to give participants the opportunity to practise their listening, thinking and responding skills. The activities suggested include a role play for practising attentive body language, an exercise that involves turning ‘closed’ questions into ‘open’ questions, and an exercise in which all of the listening, thinking and responding skills are practised.

Following the introduction of the ‘One-on-One Time’, ‘Catch Them Being Good’ and ‘Listen, Think, Respond’ concepts, it is recommended that facilitators spend some time summarising and troubleshooting any foreseeable difficulties in putting these new parenting skills into practise. Some tips in relation to identifying the issue at hand and problem-solving strategies are provided as a guideline in the manual.

The final topic covered in the session is that of Lightning Bolt Issues and Questions. In discussing listening, thinking and responding skills, parents may express concern in relation to handling the communication of sensitive topics, or ‘lightning bolt’ topics, with their children. Two common lightning bolt issues (i.e. the reasons for parental separation, and the issue of new partners) are provided as examples, and tips for managing these sensitive topics with children are discussed with the group. This information is summarised in the Lightning Bolt Questions handout, which is provided to participants at the conclusion of this section for their own reference.
To conclude the session, participants are provided with the homework handout. This week’s homework is quite extensive as it requires the practising of all of the parenting skills covered in today’s session, and answering questions and feedback in relation to their progress and their children’s responses to the activities. It is suggested that facilitators provide encouragement and reassurance that they are likely to see benefits in the parent-child relationship with practise and persistence. The group is advised that any difficulties or issues that come up in attempting to practise their new skills can be addressed in the next session. The homework handout also asks participants to watch and note down some of their children’s good and bad behaviours over the week in preparation for the next session. Finally, the facilitators summarise briefly the topics covered in today’s session that have been geared towards enhancing the parent-child relationship, and flag that the next session will focus on discipline strategies in response to their children’s undesirable behaviours.

3.2.7 Session 6: Parenting skills, Part 2 - love and discipline. As outlined at the beginning of Session 5, many of the activities and materials in the current session have been adapted from the New Beginnings Program, and thus have established effectiveness in the literature. The current session is focused on discipline strategies with children when parents are faced with undesirable behaviour. The session agenda is firstly presented, followed by the homework review. It is suggested that facilitators elicit responses from each participant regarding some of the skills they tried with their children that worked well, and some that did not work so well. Difficulties can then be problem-solved as a group. Participants are then asked to nominate some of their children’s good and bad behaviours that they noted over the week for homework, and facilitators flag that the current session will be looking at strategies for increasing their children’s desirable behaviours and decreasing behaviours that are undesirable.
In the first section of the session after the homework review, the concepts of discipline and parenting styles are introduced to the group. Discipline is firstly conceptualised as being about teaching rather than punishment. Then, some of the challenges of disciplining children as single parents (e.g., less time to supervise and less help, divorce increases stress which impacts negatively on parents and children etc), and the conundrum of parents having less help with discipline after separation but more complex discipline problems to deal with given that children often behave more poorly as a reaction to the parental separation. The Parenting Styles handout is then distributed to the group, and discussed. This handout outlines three different parenting styles in relation to discipline and authority (i.e. authoritarian, permissive, and democratic), and participants are asked to identify which parenting style best describes them and their former partner. The group is then informed that the aim of the session is to promote and increase more democratic parenting practises in disciplining children.

Next, the question ‘Why do children misbehave?’ is posed to the group and responses are invited and written on the board. Some suggestions are included in the manual, and facilitators are suggested to obtain responses that match these suggestions, which include: a lack of positive attention; being unequipped to express their feelings and make themselves heard; being unclear of the rules or expectations and so are ‘testing the limits’; and believing they may get away with the behaviour.

The importance of developing a discipline plan is the focus of the next section of the session. The Developing a Discipline Plan handout is distributed to participants, and is discussed as a group. This handout makes three recommendations to parents when developing a discipline plan: (1) to adopt clear and realistic expectations for behaviours you would like to see increase and decrease; (2) develop
a plan which includes reasonable and enforceable consequences, and clearly communicate expectations and consequences to children. Be consistent in implementing these consequences; (3) use the plan, and evaluate and change it as needed. The first two recommendations are then the focus of the rest of the session. In discussing the adoption of clear and realistic expectations in developing a discipline plan, emphasis is placed on the importance of age-appropriate expectations and being very specific in regards to behaviour rather than too general so the child knows exactly which behaviours are acceptable and unacceptable.

In discussing the development of a consequences plan for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, the emphasis is placed on responding every time a child meets or fails to meet an expectation. Positive attention is recommended for meeting an expectation, such as compliments, thank-yous and special privileges. Options for responding to the failure to meet an expectation are then examined with the group using the *Options for Responding to Undesirable Behaviour* handout. Options suggested include: ignoring bad behaviour; increasing supervision or monitoring; enforcing the loss of meaningful privileges; instituting a negative or unpleasant consequence such as ‘time-out’, extra work or extra chores. The notion of time-out is explored more thoroughly with the aid of the handout *Using Time-Out Effectively*, adapted from Sori and Hecker (2003). This handout discusses the logistics of time-out (such as choosing a good spot, duration, explaining the rules etc), guidelines for applying time-out effectively, and troubleshooting difficulties in instituting time-out, particularly with behaviourally challenging children.

To summarise and reinforce the information covered in this week’s session, participants are provided with the *Choosing a Consequence* and *Communicating Your Expectations and Consequences To Your Children* handouts, and it is suggested
that participants practise communicating the expectations and consequences of their discipline plan in pairs. As a final note, facilitators communicate to the group that, while expectations and consequences for behaviours can vary between households, children are able to tolerate these variances as long as they are aware of the rules for each household.

Participants are provided with the homework handout for the week, which requires them to develop and implement a discipline plan for their children, and to provide feedback in relation to any difficulties or issues that they experienced in the process. They are also reminded of the importance of carrying out Family Fun Time, Catch Them Being Good and One-on-One Time, and are asked to note how many times they completed each of these activities over the week. The session concludes with a summary of the discipline strategies covered, and a brief outline of the topics that will be covered in Session 7.

3.2.8 Session 7: Parenting review, legal issues and finances. At the beginning of Session 7, it is flagged to facilitators that the content has been deliberately restricted to allow for the coverage of material that was not utilised in previous weeks due to time restrictions, or for the revision and/or troubleshooting of principles and materials previously learned. It has been suggested that facilitators, in answering questions or troubleshooting difficulties, seek the feedback of other participants as much as possible to both gauge the progress and understanding of the group and to promote a collaborative atmosphere as per the American Group Psychotherapy Association (2007) guidelines for facilitating group therapy interventions.

The session opens with an outline of the agenda, followed by the homework review. In discussing the homework, participants are asked to share feedback in
relation to the development and implementation of their discipline plan, and it is recommended that the group spend some time troubleshooting any difficulties that arose for participants in this process and brainstorming ideas for improvement.

Next, in the section *When Things Go Wrong – What Are My Legal Options?*, participants are invited to discuss their experiences of the legal system in relation to separation and parenting. The *Family Law Act Information* handout is distributed to the group to provide participants with some information regarding their legal rights and responsibilities; however, facilitators are advised to inform participants that they are not qualified to provide legal advice. The *Your Feelings About Court* handout is also provided, outlining some of the difficulties parents may experience when involved in the legal system, and makes suggestions as to how parents can manage these difficulties. Both of the handouts provided in this session contain information and recommendations from the *Parenting and Child Health* website. It is suggested that facilitators may additionally like to create a list of the contact details or provide brochures of relevant organisations (e.g., Legal Aid, Community Legal Centre etc.).

In the next part of the session, *Managing My Finances*, participants are invited to discuss how things have changed for them financially since separation, and how they have coped with these changes. The *Fortnightly Budget* handout is distributed to participants, and the benefits of developing and implementing a budget are outlined. The group is informed that this handout was obtained from the *Me and My Money* publication supplied by the Child Support Agency, and it is recommended that participants contact this agency for further information and advice in relation to financial parenting matters if required.

The homework handout, *My Reflections on the Course*, is then provided to participants. For homework this week, participants are asked to reflect on many
aspects of the material covered throughout the course, i.e. how they and their children are coping with the separation, interparental conflict, the quality of parent’s relationships with their children, discipline, going to court and finances. This is in preparation for the course review in the final session. To conclude the session, a brief summary of the material covered today, and an outline of the final session, is provided to the group.

3.2.9 Session 8: A review of things learned and moving on - where to from here, dating, setbacks and beyond. As per the guidelines of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA; 2007), the ending phase of the program is designed as an important, unique stage of the intervention with its own goals and processes. Facilitators are asked to be mindful of terminating with this group, given that the losses and separations previously experienced in former relationships may stimulate unresolved conflicts at the ending phase of the program and make termination difficult for some participants. Thus, the aim of the final session of the program is to cement change for the individual participants and to provide a positive experience of termination for the group in the hope that participants may apply this process of the group ending to future leave takings and life transitions. Joyce et al (2007) recommend that termination of a therapy group comprises the following key elements: (1) a review and reinforcement of individual change which has occurred in the therapy; (2) guidance by the therapist to resolve relationships with the therapist and group members; and (3) help for the individual to face future life demands with the tools imparted in the therapy. The termination activities and processes outlined in this session are designed to address these elements.

To commence the final session, the agenda is outlined, followed by the homework review, whereby participants are asked to provide some feedback on the reflection
homework task and discuss whether any questions came up for them in reflecting upon their progress throughout the program.

Next, participants are invited to discuss any experiences they may have had with dating and new relationships since the separation from their former partner, and to discuss how they have assisted their children to adjust to their new relationships. The handout, Moving On (adapted from Ricci, 1997), is distributed to the group, which provides some guidelines for adjusting to and managing new relationships after separation. Next, the issue of step-families is raised, and the handout Making Step-Families Work (derived from the Parenting and Child Health website) is provided to the group for discussion. The handout describes the different perspectives that different members of the family may have in relation to the formation of a new step-family, some of the losses that may be felt by the different parties involved, and some factors and challenges to be mindful of in forming a step-family. This handout goes on to provide some guidelines and reminders in relation to managing this process effectively, and suggests that further advice and support in relation to step-families may be sought through The Stepfamily Association of Victoria.

The group is then directed towards a discussion around skills obtained through the program, and participants are invited to nominate three of the most important things learned over the last 8 weeks. Setbacks are then normalised as an inevitable part of any change process, and importance is placed on the management of setbacks as they occur. The handout Setbacks – They Are Natural is distributed to the group, which provides some tips for handling setbacks, including concentrating on what has been achieved and the changes that have been made, challenging
negative thinking (e.g., ‘I’ve failed’) and using self-coping statements. Participants are also invited to devise some of their own ideas.

In the next section of the manual, *Support From Each Other*, facilitators are asked to sensitively gauge whether the group would like to share contact details for staying in touch after the program, and it is suggested that a piece of paper is passed around the group for participants to write down their contact details for distributing to the group. However, facilitators are asked to emphasise that the sharing of contact details is optional.

Finally, participants complete an exercise designed to gauge their progress throughout the program. Firstly, facilitators provide each participant with the *Goals and Expectations* worksheet that they completed at the commencement of the program for Session 1 homework. This worksheet outlines each participant’s goals for the course. Secondly, a copy of the *Goals and Expectations Achieved* worksheet is then filled in, providing participants with an indication of the extent to which their goals have been achieved, and areas they may like to focus on improving in the future.

The 2007 AGPA guidelines propose that a therapeutic ending will include taking time to say goodbye and to disengage from the relationships within the group. This may be achieved through the performance of ending rituals such as gift giving, the sharing of food etc. Accordingly, facilitators are suggested to host a small farewell gathering to conclude the session and either provide food for the group or ask participants to each provide something to share. It is suggested that facilitators both normalise feelings of sadness associated with the program ending, and guide participants to reflect on therapeutic gains and encourage continued learning and practice of the techniques imparted throughout the program.
3.3 Summary of The FMC PSPP Manual Development

The construction of the FMC PSPP manual was informed by the parental separation and divorce literature reviewed in the introductory chapters of this thesis, and was therefore long-term in duration and skills-based in nature. The program was designed to cover a wide range of content, including the impact of interparental conflict on children, enhancing the adjustment of both parents and children, improving the parent-child relationship and general parenting. Skills and information were designed to be taught via a range of modalities, including handouts, worksheets, role plays, video and structured activities. Homework exercises were provided at the end of each session to consolidate learning and encourage practice in the real-world context.
CHAPTER 4

METHOD

4.1. Research Design

The research study was longitudinal in nature and took the form of a nested mixed-design, in which the sample commenced with two groups of participants – an intervention group (i.e., recipients of the Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program [FMC PSPP] described in Chapter 3) and a waitlist control group. The intervention group was administered a pre-intervention (one week prior to the commencement of the group), post-intervention (at the immediate conclusion of the group) and 3-month follow-up assessment. The waitlist control group received two pre-intervention assessments (1 month and 1 week prior to commencement of the group) to form a baseline comparison group. The waitlist control group then went on to undertake the intervention and thus became part of the intervention group. As a result, these individuals also received a post-intervention and 3-month follow-up assessment. The repeated assessments focused on changes over time across groups in the domains of interparental conflict, parental adjustment (including both general psychological and separation-specific adjustment), child adjustment and the parent-child relationship.

4.2. Participants

Eligibility criteria for program participation comprised the following: (1) separation or divorce from a former partner and with children; (2) engagement in
ongoing interparental conflict; (3) an age of 18 years or over; and (4) a willingness and ability to commit to at least 2 hours per week for the 8-week duration of the program. In assessing the suitability of participants for the program, facilitators were also asked to consider the following exclusion criteria, as they were considered to be potentially contraindicative to effective program delivery: (1) evidence of suicidality; (2) psychotic illness; (3) domestic violence; (4) overt anger and inability to contain emotions; (5) troublesome symptoms or behaviours such as limited insight or very verbose speech.

A total of 61 participants were assessed as eligible and recruited into the study. Of these, 18 completed the waitlist pre- and post-assessments to form the waitlist control group, and then went on to join the intervention group. There were 43 participants who commenced in the intervention condition and completed the pre-intervention assessment; however, 12 dropped out of the study prior to completing the post-intervention assessment, therefore only 31 participants completed the full set of intervention assessments. A flow diagram depicting participant recruitment and progression through the study is presented in the appendices (See Figure 1, Appendix A).

4.2.1 Gender, Age and Birthplace. A total of 61 participants were recruited for the current study, which comprised 34 women and 27 men. Participants were recruited from three Family Mediation Centres located across three different suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. There were 21 participants from the Moorabbin site of the Family Mediation Centre, and 20 each from the Narre Warren and Ringwood sites. The average age of participants was 38.9 years ($SD = 6.6$ years; range = 26 to 51 years), thus the current sample is slightly younger than the general divorcing population, with the median divorcing age for men and women in 2007 being 44.2 years and 41.3 years, respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS],
2007). However, the age difference between this sample compared to the general divorcing population would be expected as the current study conflates those individuals who have separated with individuals who have proceeded to divorce, and is coupled with the fact that there is an average lag time of 3.6 years between relationship separation and divorce (ABS, 2007). The sample was predominantly Australian born (78.3%), while 11.7% were reportedly born in the United Kingdom (UK), 5.0% were born in European countries other than the UK, 1.7% were reportedly Asian born, while the remaining 3.3% of the sample specified their birthplace as ‘other’.

4.2.2 Education, Occupation and Income. In relation to level of education, 24 participants (39.3%) in the current sample reported that their highest level of education attained was primary school, which is higher than the national rate of 29% reported by the ABS (2010). Twenty-one participants (34.4%) reported that their highest level of education was secondary school, which was also higher than the 21% of secondary school completers reported by the ABS (2010). Fifteen participants (24.6%) had attained a trade certificate or diploma (somewhat comparable to the 17% rate reported by the ABS in 2010), and one participant (1.6%) had attained a university degree, which was much lower than the national university completion rate of 23% (ABS, 2010). These figures suggest that the current sample was skewed towards lower educated people relative to the general Australian population, and is in line with research demonstrating an inverse relationship between higher educational attainment and divorce rates (Nakonezny, 1995).

Approximately a quarter of the sample were homemakers (N = 15, 24.6%), with 16 participants (26.2%) reporting a sales/clerical/office occupation, 14 (23.0%) reporting a professional career, 13 (21.3%) reporting a trade occupation, while one participant (1.6%) reported being a student and two (3.3%) were unemployed.
Annual income before tax ranged between $8,000 and $150,000, with an average income of $44,256. This is comparable to the 2007 to 2008 average equivalised disposable household income of $42,172 for all persons living in private dwellings (i.e., the income that a single person household would require to maintain the same standard of living as the average person living in all private dwellings in Australia; ABS, 2011).

4.2.3 Length of Cohabitation with Former Partner, Time Since Separation and Current Relationship Status. The average length of cohabitation with the former partner prior to separation was 9.17 years (SD = 6.01 years). This cohabitation figure is similar to the national median length of marriage prior to separation, which was reported to be 8.9 years in 2007 (ABS, 2007). The average length of time since separation with the former partner ranged from 1 month to 10 years, with an average of 3.08 years (SD = 2.89 years). With regard to current relationship status, 33 participants (80.5%) were reportedly single, separated or divorced, while 6 participants (14.6%) in this group were currently in a de facto relationship with a new partner, and 2 (4.9%) had remarried.

4.2.4 Number of Children and Living Arrangements. Thirty-five participants in the sample reported having only one child (57.4%), while 20 participants (32.8%) reported having two children, and six participants (9.8%) reported having three children (the maximum number of children for this sample). In relation to custody of children post-separation, of the 54.8% of the sample that reported having residency of their children 5 to 7 days per week, mothers made up 51.6% while fathers made up only 3.2%. Of the 22.6% of the sample that had residency of children 3 to 4 days per week, mothers made up 6.5% and fathers
16.1%. The remaining 22.6% of the sample were fathers who saw their children one to two days per week or less than one day per week (9.7% and 12.9%, respectively). These figures are in line with recent reports that children in separated families spend considerably more time with their mother than their father (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2011).

4.3 Measures

The questionnaire package (which was identical across all time-points) comprised demographic questions and questions pertaining to participants’ relationship with their former partner and parenting arrangements (i.e., length of time spent cohabiting with the former partner, length of time since separation, number of children, custodial and living arrangements for children, etc.). The packages also comprised questionnaire measures of dimensions of interparental conflict and children’s exposure to this conflict, aspects of parent adjustment (both separation-specific and general psychological adjustment), the parent-child relationship, and child adjustment. Each measure is described in detail below.

4.3.1 Family Conflict Styles Questionnaire (FCSQ; Troth, 1992) Participants’ conflict resolution styles with their former partners were measured via the FCSQ, which was adapted by Troth (1992) from Rand et al.’s (1981) measure of conflict resolution styles between adults and their intimate partners. The original authors identified three conflict resolution styles: attacking, avoiding and compromising. An ‘attacking’ resolution style involves verbal abuse, anger and sarcasm; an ‘avoiding’ resolution style involves withdrawing and avoiding talking after an argument, and becoming cool and distant; a ‘compromising’ style involves
attempts to understand a partner’s feelings, and adopting reasoning tactics smooth things over and work out a compromise.

In Troth’s (1992) adaptation of the original instrument, three items were removed due to a lack of internal consistency with the other items, resulting in a 12-item measure with four items assessing each of the three conflict styles (i.e., attacking, avoiding, and compromising). Troth (1992) devised three parallel sets of items to measure adolescents’ perceptions of their mothers’ and fathers’ use of the three conflict-resolution styles during parent-child conflict. In the current study, the FCSQ items developed by Troth (1992) were adapted to assess participants’ conflict resolution strategies used during interactions with their former partner. Thus, each of the three scales assessed one particular conflict style (attacking, avoiding, compromising), with the instructions altered to refer to the self in the context of conflict with the former partner. For example, the item ‘My mother/father clams up and holds in his/her feelings’ was adapted to ‘You clam up and hold in your feelings’. Participants were asked how well each statement described how they react when in disagreement with their former partner, and were given four response options (1 = not at all, 2 = not too well, 3 = fairly well, and 4 = very well). Subscale scores range from 4 – 16 and are computed by summing the items.

Internal reliabilities for the Avoid and Attack subscales have been found to be moderate with alpha coefficients for Avoid ranging from .61 to .79 for mothers and .64 to .79 for fathers, and alphas for Attack ranging from .69 to .76 for mothers and .67 to .78 for fathers (Atkinson, 2004). High internal reliabilities have also been reported for the Compromise subscale of the FCSQ, with alphas ranging from .75 to .89 for mothers and .77 to .84 for fathers (Atkinson, 2004). Reliability analysis for the current sample revealed good internal reliabilities for all three subscales of the
FCSQ, yielding alphas of .76, .79 and .88 for Avoid, Attack and Compromise, respectively (for details see Table 3 in Chapter 5).

4.3.2 Children’s Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPICS; Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). The CPICS is a 49-item questionnaire assessing children’s exposure to various dimensions of interparental conflict derived from Grych and Fincham’s (1990) cognitive-contextual framework for investigating the relationship between interparental conflict and child adjustment (as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis). Factor analysis of the CPICS has revealed three reliable broad factors – Conflict Properties, Self-Blame and Threat, with each factor comprising a series of subscales. Specifically, the Conflict Properties factor consists of three subscales reflecting frequency, intensity and resolution of conflict, while the Self-Blame factor consists of two subscales representing the content and nature of self-blame, and the Threat factor consists of subscales reflecting the experience of threat and coping efficacy (Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). Given that the Conflict Properties factor of the CPICs has been found to be most closely related to child adjustment problems (Grych et al., 1992), only the subscales of this factor (i.e., frequency, intensity and resolution) were used in the current study to assess children’s exposure to interparental conflict and conflict severity.

The CPICS in its original form is a child-rated questionnaire, but was adapted in the current study to a parent-rated version, as per Atkinson (2004). Thus, while the item content of the Conflict Properties subscales were retained, the instructions pertaining to the items were altered, with participants asked to respond to items in reference to conflictual interactions with their former partner. For example, an item on the child-report version “I never see my parents arguing or disagreeing” was altered to “My children never see my partner and I arguing or disagreeing”.
Participants were asked how well each statement on the measure describes aspects of the conflict between themselves and their former partners, and were given three response options: 1 = True, 2 = Sort of True and 3 = False. Once negatively worded items were reverse coded, scores on each subscale were then summed to produce a total score for that subscale, with higher scores reflecting conflict that is more frequent, intense and poorly resolved.

Psychometric properties of the Conflict Properties Scale of the CPICS have been shown to be adequate. Internal reliability has been established for the subscales, which have yielded alpha coefficients of .82, .70 and .83 for the Intensity, Frequency and Resolution subscales, respectively (Grych et al., 1992). An acceptable level of stability has also been demonstrated across two samples, with 2-week test-retest reliability coefficients of .70 (Grych et al., 1992) and .95 (Bickham & Fiese, 1997). Concurrent and criterion validity have also been found, with the Conflict Properties subscale correlating significantly with two parent-rated assessment measures of marital conflict (Grych et al., 1992).

Internal reliability was calculated on the adapted version of the scale used in the current study to ensure its usefulness as a parent-report measure of interparental conflict. In the present sample, the modified version was found to yield good internal consistency with alpha coefficients ranging from .74 to .79 for the three subscales (i.e., frequency, intensity and resolution), and .85 for the Conflict Properties Scale overall (Refer to Table 3 in Chapter 5).

4.3.3 Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test (PAST; Sweeper & Halford, 2006). The PAST is a 26-item self-report measure of three key dimensions of adjustment specific to separation (Sweeper & Halford, 2006), and was employed as a measure of adjustment problems specific to separation over and above general
psychological adjustment, and as an assessment of levels of conflict in relation to parenting issues. The first dimension of the scale, labeled Lonely Negativity, contains 11 items assessing feelings of isolation and loneliness and labile negative affect in reference to relationship separation. The 8-item Former Partner Attachment subscale measures feelings of loss and attachment to the former partner, and the 7-item Coparenting Conflict subscale reflects difficulties in negotiating coparenting issues with the former partner. Participants are required to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements such as ‘I constantly think about my former partner’ and ‘I feel isolated’ on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Some items require reverse coding, and subscale total scores are derived by summing the items.

All three scales have demonstrated high internal consistency over two samples (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). The lonely negativity scale yielded Cronbach’s alphas of .90 and .89 across both samples, while alphas of .88 and .89 were yielded across the samples for the former partner attachment scale, and alphas of .83 and .86 were found across the two samples for the coparenting conflict scale (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Test-retest reliability has also been demonstrated to be high for the three scales of the PAST with intra-class correlation coefficients of .85, .93, and .89 for lonely negativity, ex-partner connection, and parenting negotiation, respectively (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). The subscales have also demonstrated acceptable convergent validity when compared with a validated measure of interparental conflict after separation, (the Coparenting Conflict Scale; Ahrons, 1981), and divergent validity when compared with a measure of general psychological adjustment (the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Thus, the PAST has been established as a reliable and valid measure of separation-specific adjustment problems.
4.3.4 The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale, 21-item (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The DASS-21 is a short form of Lovibond and Lovibond’s (1995) 42-item self-report measure of general psychological distress. It consists of three 7-item self-report subscales (i.e., depression, anxiety and stress) taken from the full version of the DASS, and requires participants to score symptoms over the last week on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much, or most of the time). Scores ranging from 0 – 9 for depression, 0 – 7 for anxiety and 0 – 14 for stress are considered to fall within the normal range, while scores above these ranges indicate the severity of the problem from mild through to extremely severe.

Good internal reliability has been demonstrated for all three of the subscales, with Cronbach’s alphas of .88, .82 and .93 for the Depression, Anxiety and Stress subscales respectively (Henry & Crawford, 2005). Validity data for the DASS-21 has been found to replicate the results for the full version of the DASS (Crawford & Henry, 2003). Thus, the short-form measure has also been shown to have good convergent and discriminant validity when compared with other validated measures of depression and anxiety, including the Hospital Anxiety and Depression scale (Zigmond & Snaith, 1983) and the Personal Distress Scale (Bedford & Foulds, 1978). The DASS also has established stability over time, yielding strong test-retest reliability coefficients for all three subscales (range of rs = 0.71 - 0.81) in a large clinical sample (Brown, Chorpita, Korotitsch & Barlow, 1996).

4.3.5 Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979). The PBI is a 25-item self-report instrument with two subscales, which was originally designed to measure individuals’ recollections of the quality of their
parent-child relationships in the first 16 years of life (Parker et al., 1979). In the current study, however, the items on the measure were altered from past to present tense and participants were asked to respond with reference to their own current parenting styles rather than recalling those of their parents retrospectively (as per Atkinson, 2004). Participants were required to rate their agreement with each item pertaining to their own parenting behaviour with their children. For example, in the current study, the item “(My mother/father) was affectionate to me”, was altered to “I am affectionate toward (my child)”. Items were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Some items were reverse coded based on the wording of the item, then items were summed to obtain a total subscale score.

The PBI comprises a 12 item Care subscale measuring the perceived level of affection, emotional warmth, empathy and closeness in the relationship between parent and child, and a 13 item Overprotection subscale which measures perceived control, overprotection and intrusiveness within the parent-child relationship. Given that elements of the FMC PSPP are addressing aspects of the parent-child relationship reflected in the Care subscale of the PBI, only the scores from this subscale were included in analysis.

The Care subscale of the PBI has well-established psychometric properties, with good internal reliability (α = .70) reported by the original authors of the measure (Parker et al., 1979). A 3-week test-retest reliability coefficient of .76, an interrater reliability of .85, and a split-half reliability coefficient of .88 were also reported in the original paper for the Care dimension of the PBI (Parker et al., 1979). Longer term stability of the subscale has also been established, with intra-class correlation coefficients calculated over a 5-year period ranging from .72 to .82 in a non-clinical sample (Wilhelm & Parker, 1990). Ten-year test-retest coefficients for the subscale
ranged from .63 to .72 (Wilhelm & Parker, 1990), while twenty-year test-retest coefficients have been found to range from .64 to .82 in a non-clinical sample (Wilhelm et al., 2005). Concurrent validity has been reported for the Care subscale when compared to independent interviewer ratings of parental care dimensions (Parker et al., 1979), and satisfactory construct and convergent validity have been demonstrated (Parker, 1983). Given the modifications to the scale in this study, internal reliability was also calculated for the Care subscale in the current sample, and was found to be high (α = .88, see also Table 3 in Chapter 5).

4.3.6 Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is a 25-item questionnaire developed to screen for emotional and behavioural symptomatology in children and adolescents aged 3 to 16 years, with 5 items each pertaining to: (1) emotional symptoms, (2) conduct problems, (3) hyperactivity/inattention, (4) peer relationship problems and (5) prosocial behavior (Goodman, 1997). The questionnaire may be completed either by an informant or the child themselves, with parents in the current study completing one SDQ measure for each of their children respectively. Scores may be calculated for each subscale individually, or a total difficulties score may be calculated by summing the emotion, conduct, hyperactivity and peer subscale scores but excluding the prosocial subscale score as this pertains to positive aspects of child adjustment. In the current study, 40% of participants had more than one child. For these participants, only the results for the child with the greatest total difficulties score were utilised. Children with the highest total difficulties score represent those with the most severe adjustment issues (Goodman, 1997). These children are likely to demonstrate the most change in response to the intervention, therefore the scores of these children were considered to be of the greatest clinical significance in this study.
Psychometric properties of the SDQ total difficulties scale scores have generally been shown to be acceptable. A mean alpha of .82 has been evidenced for internal consistency, and \( r = .77 \) for 12-month test-retest reliability, and correlations between the subscales, teacher ratings and diagnostic interviews have demonstrated sound external validity of the measure (Hawes & Dadds, 2004). This was further supported by the relationship of SDQ total difficulties scores to the concurrent treatment status of participants (Hawes & Dadds, 2004).

4.4 Research Procedure

Prior to commencement of the study, a formal agreement was made between the researchers and the Family Mediation Centre (FMC) to conduct the research, and an application to conduct the study was submitted to, and approved by, the Deakin University Research Ethics Committee (Appendix B). Brochures advertising the program were placed in the centres (Appendix C), and participants were then recruited into the program by self-selection through registering their interest in attending the program with the FMC in response to these brochures. FMC mediators then assessed the participants for suitability for the program. Alternatively, participants could be referred to attend the program by the mediators directly based on observation by the mediators of high levels of conflict between couples throughout the mediation process. High conflict between the couples was characterised by shouting, verbal attacks, general poor communication, and poor conflict management.

Once a participant had registered their interest in attending a program, they were contacted by phone by a group facilitator to discuss the details and practicalities of the program, check participants’ eligibility to attend, and to screen for eligibility
and exclusion criteria. Those that were deemed appropriate participants for the program were then either placed on a waiting list to participate in a future group approximately one month away (and were thus assigned to the waitlist control group), or were enrolled to attend the next upcoming group, depending upon availability of places in the group. The waitlist participants then went on to participate in the program following the waitlist period (thus joining the intervention group). Given that the study sample comprised separated parents assessed to be in high fluctuating conflict with their ex-partners, it was prudent to involve the participants in the intervention no longer than one month after being placed on the waitlist in order to fulfill duty of care requirements. One month also allowed ample time for intervention participants to be well advanced in the program (at least halfway through), so this was considered to be an adequate timeframe. Individuals were enrolled in separate programs from their former partners in instances where both members of a former couple wished to attend the program. This approach was taken to safeguard against the difficulties experienced with co-attendance of high-conflict couples in parenting programs outlined in the research (Laufer & Berman, 2006).

Each participant, upon initial contact with the group facilitator, was asked for their permission to participate in the current research, and participants from both groups (waitlist control and intervention) that consented were sent a research package comprising a Plain Language Statement, Consent Form (Appendix D) and the questionnaire measures outlined in Section 4.3 (Appendix E). A reply-paid envelope addressed to Deakin University was included in the package, and participants were instructed either to return the completed questionnaire by mail (for waitlist participants) or to hand to the group facilitator at the first program session (intervention participants only). The group facilitators then forwarded those
questionnaires received at the first PSPP session to the researchers by mail. Waitlist participants were sent the same questionnaire package twice – at least one month before commencing the program and again one week prior to participating in the program, and given the same instructions for returning these questionnaires to the researchers. The two questionnaire packages completed by the waitlist group (at registration and pre-intervention) thus provided baseline assessments for comparison to the intervention condition.

The intervention group participants attended eight 2-hour PSPP sessions, weekly, at one of the sites of the Family Mediation Centre (session procedure details are outlined below). In the week prior to the completion of the group, participants who had completed the initial questionnaire were sent a post-intervention questionnaire to complete at the conclusion of the program and again were instructed to either hand the questionnaire to the group facilitator at the final group session, or to return it to the researcher in the Deakin University reply-paid envelope provided. A 3-month follow-up questionnaire was mailed to those participants in the intervention group who had completed the questionnaire at the post-assessment time-point and participants were instructed to mail the completed questionnaire to the researcher using the Deakin University reply-paid envelope provided. Reminder emails were sent to participants who had not returned the follow-up questionnaire one month after it had been mailed to them. Questionnaires included the same measures at all time-points for both groups (i.e., waitlist control and the intervention group).

4.4.1 Session Procedure. Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program (FMC PSPP) sessions were conducted on a weekday evening for two hours each on a weekly basis over an 8-week period. The training for all
intervention groups was the same in all aspects with the exception of location (taking place at either the Moorabbin, Narre Warren or Ringwood sites of the FMC), and the actual calendar dates and day that the intervention took place at each of the three locations as it was left to the centres to organise these details at their own convenience. Two facilitators, usually one male and one female, shared the group training responsibilities. All were professional Family Mediation Centre mediators with a minimum qualification of a degree in either social work or psychology.

Once participants arrived at the centre, they were required to make payment at reception of $10 per session and to then make their way to the conference rooms where the sessions took place. Rooms were set up in a horseshoe arrangement around a whiteboard with facilitators completing the circle, and participants were free to choose their seating in the room. Sessions began on time and attendance was recorded for each session. The intervention techniques (ranging from group lecture and discussion, activities, video demonstrations and reference material handouts, and with occasional homework assignments) and the overall program procedure were as outlined in the FMC PSPP manual and discussed in Chapter 3. Data was collected from 12 intervention groups (4 groups each at the 3 different sites) over an 18-month period from the year 2008 to 2010.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

5.1 Overview

The present study was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the developed Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program (FMC PSPP) described in Chapter 3 in relation to the four outcome domains of: (1) interparental conflict, (2) the parent-child relationship, (3) parent adjustment and (4) parental perceptions of child adjustment. As outlined in Chapter 2, it was specifically hypothesised that participants would, at the completion of the active phase of the intervention and at 3-month follow-up, report: (i) a significant decrease in the frequency of interparental conflict and in the destructive conflict dimensions (i.e., intensity, avoiding, attacking, poor resolution and coparenting conflict), and a significant increase in the more constructive aspects of interparental conflict (i.e., compromising); (ii) significant improvements in (a) general psychological adjustment and (b) separation-specific parental adjustment; (iii) significantly improved parent-reported child adjustment; and (iv) significant improvements in parent-child relationships. Comparatively, it was hypothesized that those in the waitlist control group would report no significant changes across these domains over time.

The first section of this chapter presents the results of preliminary data analyses, including data screening and treatment, and analyses relating to attrition, gender, and the waitlist control group. The second section of the chapter outlines the results of the primary data analyses, which are presented in the form of descriptive data and statistical tests.
Descriptive data for each outcome measure is presented in tabulated form across the three time intervals (pre-intervention, post-intervention and 3-month follow-up), and trends are outlined. Further statistical analyses exploring these trends for significance are then presented for each of the outcome domains along with post-hoc comparison of means to determine the precise nature of statistical differences. The results are then summarised in the concluding paragraphs of the chapter. All data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18.0.

5.2 Preliminary Data Analyses

5.2.1 Data Screening and Assumption Testing. Prior to the main analyses, the entire data set was screened for accuracy of data entry, and missing data. The accuracy of the data file was investigated by checking that all values fell within scale ranges. No missing data was found as only completed questionnaires were included in analyses, and this was confirmed via an SPSS Missing Values Analysis. The data set was screened for univariate outliers via inspection of the standardized residuals ($z_{\text{residuals}} > \pm 3.29, \alpha = .001$), and multivariate outliers were investigated via Mahalanobis Distance ($p < .001$ level, Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Inspection of $z_{\text{residuals}}$ and Mahalanobis Distance did not reveal the presence of any univariate or multivariate outliers.

Univariate normality was assessed across all observed variables by examining the absolute and standardised skewness and kurtosis statistics. One of the dependent variables (DASS Anxiety) demonstrated mild absolute skewness (2.01) and kurtosis (5.19) at the post-intervention stage (See Table 2); however, these values still fell within the bounds of absolute values of skewness and kurtosis (absolute skewness
[2.0] and absolute kurtosis [7.0], Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). While a number of variables demonstrated standardized skewness and kurtosis values suggesting a deviation from normality (zskewness and kurtosis > ± 3.29, α = .001), more recent approaches to the treatment of normality suggest that variable transformations should only be undertaken when variables violate both absolute and standardized normality thresholds (Curran et al., 1996; Wright & Herrington, 2011). Otherwise, the transformation of data may result in increased Type II error rates. Given this criteria, the data were not subjected to any form of transformation.

Table 2

Skewness and Kurtosis Values-All Measures

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Kurtosis</td>
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<td>.08</td>
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<td>-.65</td>
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<td>1.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follow-Up</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** PAST (LN, FPA and CC) = Parenting After Separation Test (Lonely Negativity, Former Partner Attachment and Coparenting Conflict subscales); PBI Care = Parental Bonding Instrument, Care subscale; DASS (Dep, Anx and Stress) = Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (Depression, Anxiety and Stress subscales); FCSQ (Avoid, Comp. and Attack) = Family Conflict Styles Questionnaire (Avoid, Compromise and Attack subscales); CPICS (Freq., Intens., and Reso) = Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Frequency, Intensity and Resolution subscales); SDQ Tot. Diff. (MSC) = Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, Total Difficulties (Most Severe Child).
Reliability analyses for the current sample were conducted on all scales, and are presented in Table 3 below. All scales demonstrated good to high reliabilities with no scale falling below a Cronbach’s alpha of .74.

Table 3

*Internal Reliability for All Scales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales and Subscales</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Former Partner Attachment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coparenting Conflict</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DASS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCSQ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPICS</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intensity</td>
<td>.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDQ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Difficulties</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Most Severe Child)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* PAST = Parenting After Separation Test; PBI = Parental Bonding Instrument; DASS = Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale; FCSQ = Family Conflict Styles Questionnaire; CPICS = Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale; SDQ = Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire.
5.2.2 Attrition Analyses. There were 12 participants out of the 61 (20.0%) who dropped out of the study during the active phase of intervention (i.e., drop-out occurred between the pre- to post-intervention stage). This may be considered a low attrition rate given the findings of a meta-analysis by Wierzbicki & Pekarik (1993), who reported an average dropout rate of 46.86% for intervention studies. The rate of the current study is more comparable to the drop-out rate of 26% found for effectiveness studies in a recent meta-analysis by Swift, Greenberg and Bennett (2011).

Attrition analyses were performed to check for differences on all the measured variables between those participants who dropped out of the study compared to those participants that remained in the study through to completion. A series of independent samples t-tests (with Family-wise Bonferroni corrections) revealed no significant differences between the drop-out group and the completion group on any of the assessment measures (i.e., the PAST, DASS, FCSQ, PBI, CPICS and the SDQ). Consequently, given that the group of participants that dropped out of the study did not differ to participants that remained in the study, data from those participants who completed the full battery of questionnaires at all time-points were included in all subsequent analyses. Thus, analyses were performed on full data sets from 31 participants in the intervention condition and 18 in the waitlist control condition.

5.2.3 Gender Differences Preliminary Analysis. Given the sample differences between the genders in relation to time spent with children due to custodial arrangements (reported in Section 4.2.4), an independent samples t-test (with Family-wise Bonferroni corrections) was performed to test for gender
differences at the first time-point (i.e., prior to the PSPP intervention) across all independent variables. No significant differences were found between the genders on any of the measures at the pre-intervention time-point. Thus, it was concluded that men and women did not differ significantly across the measured outcomes of the study. Consequently, data for both genders was analysed collectively for all subsequent analyses.

5.2.4 Waitlist Control Analyses. A repeated-measures t-test indicated that no significant change occurred on any of the measured variables from waitlist to pre-intervention (as outlined in Table 4 below). Therefore, it was concluded that there were no significant differences at baseline, ensuring that any changes that occurred during the active phase of the treatment were most likely due to the intervention.
Table 4

*Waitlist Control vs Treatment Condition Analyses (Paired Samples T-Test)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales and Subscales</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely Negativity</td>
<td>WL</td>
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<td>.142</td>
<td>.889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>28.44 (8.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Partner Attachment</td>
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<td>18.56 (5.69)</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>.886</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Coparenting Conflict</td>
<td>WL</td>
<td>26.78 (4.56)</td>
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<td>.508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>26.33 (3.93)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>PBI</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
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<td>28.72 (5.42)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Pre</td>
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<td>DASS</td>
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<td>Depression</td>
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<td>6.56 (6.01)</td>
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*Note:* PAST = Parenting After Separation Test; PBI = Parental Bonding Instrument; DASS = Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale; FCSQ = Family Conflict Styles Questionnaire; CPICS = Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale; SDQ = Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire
5.3 Primary Data Analyses

Given the nested design wherein the waitlist control participants went on to become intervention participants, the intervention and control groups could not be directly compared using repeated measures between-groups ANOVAs. Therefore, statistical analyses were conducted to measure changes in the intervention group across time (from pre-to post intervention, and at 3 months follow-up) in relation to the four hypothesised domains in which change was expected, namely: (i) interparental conflict; (2) parent adjustment (i.e., general psychological and separation-specific adjustment); (3) parental perceptions of child adjustment; and (4) the parent-child relationship. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each of the variables at each time-point are presented in Table 5 below. The specific analyses pertaining to each domain are discussed in the sections following.
Table 5

Descriptive Statistics (Means, SDs) for all Measures at each Time-point

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<td>16.16</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7 – 35</td>
<td>25.35</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>23.03</td>
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<td>22.58</td>
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<td>PBI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>0 – 36</td>
<td>29.29</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>29.87</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>29.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DASS</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0 – 21</td>
<td>7.03</td>
<td>8.06</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>5.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anx</td>
<td>0 – 21</td>
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<td>4.65</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>3.16</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0 – 21</td>
<td>12.32</td>
<td>9.61</td>
<td>10.84</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>11.74</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comp.</td>
<td>4 – 16</td>
<td>9.65</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>10.93</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>10.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>4 – 16</td>
<td>9.14</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>9.03</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>8.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack</td>
<td>4 – 16</td>
<td>7.84</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>6.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPICS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>6 – 18</td>
<td>11.45</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>13.26</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>13.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intens.</td>
<td>7 – 21</td>
<td>13.48</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>14.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reso.</td>
<td>6 – 18</td>
<td>8.83</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>9.61</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>10.19</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tot. Diffs. (MSC)</td>
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<td>14.55</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>14.10</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>13.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PAST (LN, FPA and CC) = Parenting After Separation Test (Lonely Negativity, Former Partner Attachment, Coparenting Conflict subscales); PBI Care = Parental Bonding Instrument, Care subscale; DASS (Dep, Anx., Stress) = Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (Depression, Anxiety and Stress subscales); FCSQ (Avoid, Comp. Attack) = Family Conflict Styles Questionnaire (Avoid, Compromise and Attack subscales); CPICS (Freq., Intens., and Reso) = Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Frequency, Intensity and Resolution subscales); SDQ Tot. Diff. (MSC) = Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, Total Difficulties (Most Severe Child).
5.3.1 Interparental Conflict. Interparental conflict severity was measured via the subscales of the Conflict Properties factor of the CPICS (i.e., Frequency, Intensity and Resolution of conflict), while the Attack, Avoid and Compromise subscales of the FCSQ were employed as an assessment of conflict style. The Coparenting Conflict subscale of the PAST was employed as a measure of conflict pertaining to the coparenting of children.

Descriptive data for the CPICS subscales indicate increases in the frequency, intensity and resolution of conflict across the three time-points. FCSQ descriptive data indicate an increase in compromising across time from pre- to post-intervention, which was maintained at follow-up. Mean decreases in both attacking and avoiding are also evident from pre- to post-intervention and again at follow-up. A decrease on the Coparenting Conflict subscale of the PAST was also indicated across all three time-points, suggesting improved parenting negotiation skills over time. Prior to conducting further analyses to determine the significance of these trends, analyses of the correlations between the interparental conflict measures were carried out (See correlational data in Table 6 below).

Table 6

Correlation Matrix for All Interparental Conflict Measures at Baseline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CPICS: Frequency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. CPICS: Intensity</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CPICS: Resolution</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. PAST: Coparenting Conflict</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. FCSQ: Avoid</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. FCSQ: Compromise</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. FCSQ: Attack</td>
<td>-.69**</td>
<td>-.64**</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p < .01. CPICS = Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale; PAST = Parenting After Separation Test; FCSQ = Family Conflict Styles Questionnaire.
The correlations presented in Table 6 reflect low to moderate associations between the interparental conflict variables. As such, the correlational analysis suggested that the associations between a number of the interparental conflict variables were too low to perform a MANOVA (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Consequently, a series of separate one-way repeated-measures ANOVAs were performed on the data to investigate any significant changes in interparental conflict across the time-points.

Changes over time in the subscales of the CPICS Conflict Properties scale (Frequency, Intensity and Resolution) were examined via a series of repeated-measures ANOVA with three levels (pre-, post- and follow-up). Mauchly’s sphericity test revealed no violations of homogeneity of variance, thus sphericity was assumed for all three subscales. The Frequency subscale analysis revealed a significant difference in Frequency at the univariate level across time, $F(2, 60) = 13.02, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .303$, with post hoc comparison of means indicating a significant increase between the pre and follow-up points, $F(1,30) = 17.62, p < .001$, as shown in Table 5.

The second repeated-measures ANOVA carried out on the Resolution subscale also indicated a significant difference at the univariate level across time, $F(2, 60) = 4.88, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .140$. Post-hoc comparison of the means indicated a significant increase in scores on this subscale between the pre-intervention and follow-up points, $F(1, 30) = 7.82, p < .01$, as outlined in Table 5. No significant differences were found in mean Intensity scores across time at the univariate level, $F(2, 60) = 2.81, p > .05$.

A series of repeated-measures ANOVA were performed on the three subscales of the FCSQ (Attack, Avoid and Compromise) to assess for changes in
conflict style across time from the pre-intervention to post-intervention and follow-up stage. Again, Mauchly’s sphericity test revealed no violations of homogeneity of variance, thus sphericity was assumed for all three subscales. The analysis revealed no significant changes across time for the Attack and Avoid subscales, however a significant effect for time was found for the Compromise subscale at the univariate level, $F(2, 60) = 4.27, \ p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .125$, with post hoc comparison of means indicating that the significant difference lay between the pre and follow-up points $F(1, 30) = 4.46, \ p < .05$, as outlined in Table 5.

Another repeated-measures ANOVA performed on the Coparenting Conflict subscale of the PAST was performed to assess changes in conflict over parenting issues across time. Mauchly’s sphericity test revealed no violations of homogeneity of variance for the subscale. A significant effect for time was found at the univariate level, $F(2, 60) = 16.19, \ p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .350$, with post hoc comparison of means revealing a significant decrease between the pre- and post-intervention time-points, $F(1,30) = 21.34, \ p < .05$, and between the pre-intervention and follow-up time-points, $F (1,30) = 6.24, \ p < .05$, suggesting decreased difficulty negotiating with the former partner across time.

5.3.2 Parent adjustment (General Psychological Adjustment and Separation-Specific Adjustment). General psychological adjustment was assessed via the DASS, while separation-specific adjustment was measured via the Lonely Negativity and Former Partner Attachment subscales of the PAST. The descriptive data (presented in Table 5) indicate a decrease in DASS depression and anxiety scores across the three time-points, while stress scores decrease from pre- to post-intervention then demonstrate a slight increase at the follow-up point. Descriptive data also suggest slight decreases in the Lonely Negativity and Former Partner
Attachment subscales of the PAST from pre- to post-intervention, which appear to have been largely maintained at follow-up. Further analyses were performed to assess the significance of these trends in general psychological and separation-specific adjustment, as described below.

5.3.2.1 General psychological adjustment. Correlational analyses indicated that the general psychological adjustment measures (Depression, Anxiety and Stress subscales of the DASS) were too highly correlated to perform a MANOVA (Tabachnick & Fiddell, 2007, see Table 7), thus a series of repeated-measures ANOVAs were performed on the subscales to assess the significance of changes across time. Mauchly’s sphericity tests revealed no violations of homogeneity of variance on any of the general adjustment measures, thus sphericity was assumed across the three subscales.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.DASS: Depression</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.DASS: Anxiety</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.DASS: Stress</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>.83**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** p < .01. DASS = Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale

Repeated-measures ANOVAs did not reveal significant changes across time for depression, $F(2, 60) = .92, p > .05$, or stress, $F(2, 60) = .94, p > .05$. However, a significant change across time was found for anxiety, $F(2, 60) = 3.17, p < .05$, with post hoc tests indicating a significant decrease in scores across the active phase of the
intervention, i.e., between the pre- and post-intervention time-points, $F(1, 30) = 4.48$, $p < .05$.

5.3.2.2 Separation-specific adjustment. Correlational analyses carried out on the separation-specific adjustment variables indicated that the relationship between the Lonely Negativity and Former Partner Attachment subscales of the PAST was too high to perform a MANOVA (Pearson’s $r = .75$) thus two repeated-measures ANOVAs were carried out on the data. Mauchly’s Test of sphericity was significant for Lonely Negativity, revealing a violation of homogeneity of variance on this subscale, $W = .71$, $\chi^2 (2) = 9.80$, $p < .025$, thus the Huynh-Feldt epsilon correction was applied in this case. Repeated-measures ANOVA carried out on the subscale revealed that changes in Lonely Negativity across time were non-significant, $F(1.62, 48.70) = .85$, $p > .05$.

Mauchly’s test of sphericity indicated no violation of homogeneity of variance on the Former Partner Attachment subscale. A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed that mean changes in scores on this subscale across time were also non-significant, $F(2, 60) = .74$, $p > .05$.

5.3.3 Child Adjustment. Descriptive data (presented in Table 5) on the SDQ for the child reported by the parent to have the most severe difficulties prior to the intervention indicates a slight decrease in SDQ Total scores across the three time-points. A repeated-measures ANOVA was carried out to investigate the significance of these trends. Mauchly’s Test of sphericity indicated a violation of homogeneity of variance on the SDQ scale, $W = .39$, $\chi^2 (2) = 26.69.80$, $p < .025$, thus the Huynh-Feldt epsilon correction was applied in this case. The analyses revealed that the decreases in SDQ scores across time were not significant $F(2, 60) = .41$, $p > .05$. 
5.3.4 The Parent-Child Relationship. Examination of the descriptive data suggests a slight increase in scores on the Care subscale of the PBI from pre- to post-intervention, then a slight decrease in scores at the follow-up point. A repeated-measures ANOVA was performed to assess the significance of the mean trends in the data on the PBI Care scale. Mauchly's sphericity test revealed no violation of homogeneity. The analysis yielded no significant differences in the parent-child relationship across time, $F(2, 60) = .77, p > .05$.

5.4 Summary of Results

To summarise, the findings in relation to interparental conflict suggest that significant increases in conflict frequency and poor resolution skills occurred across time, with the significant increases being found between the pre and follow-up time-points. An increase in mean conflict intensity was also found over time, though changes in intensity across time did not reach statistical significance. In relation to conflict styles, the descriptive data indicated an increase in attacking, avoiding and compromising styles of conflict. However, only the increase in compromising was significant statistically. According to descriptive data, a decrease on the Coparenting Conflict subscale of the PAST was indicated across all three time-points, suggesting improved parenting negotiation skills over time. These decreases were statistically significant between both the pre- and post-intervention time-points, and between the pre-intervention and follow-up time-points, suggesting improved coparenting negotiation skills over time.

In relation to parent adjustment, the descriptive data in relation to general psychological adjustment suggest a decrease in DASS depression, anxiety and stress scores across the active phase of the intervention (pre- to post-intervention), with
maintenance at follow-up for the depression and anxiety scales, and a slight increase in stress scores at the follow-up point. The decrease in anxiety reached statistical significance across the active phase of the intervention (from pre to post-intervention). The descriptive data for separation-specific adjustment suggest slight decreases in the Lonely Negativity and Former Partner Attachment subscales of the PAST from pre- to post-intervention, which appear to have been largely maintained at follow-up. However, these trends did not reach statistical significance.

In relation to parent-reported child adjustment, the descriptive data suggest a slight decrease in scores across the three time-points. However, statistical analyses revealed that the decreases in scores across time were not significant. The results in relation to the parent-child relationship may be considered similar, with examination of the descriptive data indicating a slight increase in scores on the Care subscale of the PBI from pre- to post-intervention, then a slight decrease in scores at the follow-up point. However, analysis of the means revealed that these changes were not significant at the statistical level. The study findings are interpreted and discussed in the next chapter, along with the limitations, implications and future directions of the research.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

6.1 Overview

The purpose of this thesis was to develop a post-separation parenting program (PSPP) aimed at parents entrenched in high levels of interparental conflict following separation or divorce, and to evaluate this program in relation to its effectiveness. The Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program (FMC PSPP) was thus developed and implemented into Melbourne branches of the Family Mediation Centre, and then rigorously evaluated for effectiveness via psychometrically valid and multidimensional measures of interparental conflict and other adjustment and relationship variables. It was hypothesised that, those undertaking the FMC PSPP would show at the immediate completion of the program and at 3-month follow-up: (i) a significant decrease in the frequency of interparental conflict and in the destructive conflict dimensions (i.e., intensity, avoiding, attacking, poor resolution and coparenting conflict), and a significant increase in the more constructive aspects of interparental conflict (i.e., compromising) (ii) significant improvements in both separation-specific and general psychological parental adjustment; (iii) significant improvements in parental perceptions of child adjustment, and; (iv) significant improvements in parent-child relationships. Conversely, those in the waitlist control group were hypothesised to show no improvement on these domains. In this final chapter, the results of the evaluation of the FMC PSPP will be discussed in relation
to effectiveness, followed by a review of the limitations of the study, implications for clinical practice and directions for future research.

6.2 Findings of the Present Study

The findings of the present study only partially support the hypothesised effectiveness of the developed FMC PSPP in addressing interparental conflict, parent and child adjustment issues and parent-child relationships with separated and divorced parents in high conflict. It was found that some significant improvements were seen over time for program participants on some of the interparental conflict and parent adjustment outcome variables, while no significant changes were seen in the waitlist control group participants over time. However, it must be noted that significant changes found on some of the conflict measures were not in the expected direction, therefore results were mixed overall on this domain. Changes in the expected direction of increase or reduction were also noted in some of the other outcome domains, even if statistical significance was not achieved. Therefore, the findings of the present study indicate that PSPPs may be effective in addressing some of the separation and divorce-related issues experienced by parents facing relationship breakdown, while other issues show no improvement and may in fact worsen following PSPP participation.

The findings are discussed in relation to the measured outcome domains in more detail in the following sections, which address interparental conflict firstly as the primary domain, and parent and child adjustment and the parent-child relationship as secondary domains.

6.2.1 Impact of the program on interparental conflict. The results from the current study in relation to the interparental conflict domain following program
completion were somewhat mixed, with results on some of the measured conflict dimensions adhering to expectations, and other conflict dimensions yielding results contradictory to predictions. Thus, in line with hypotheses was a significant reduction in coparenting conflict, with parents demonstrating significantly decreased difficulty negotiating post-separation childcare-related issues with their former partners over time. Avoiding and attacking conflict styles also demonstrated a mean decrease over time, though results did not reach statistical significance in relation to these dimensions. Further in line with predictions were results in relation to compromising, which reflected a constructive dimension of conflict. Thus, a significant increase in compromising in relation to interparental arguments was reported by program participants over time.

Despite positive results on these aspects of conflict, some of the other destructive conflict dimensions were actually found to worsen following program participation. Thus, while it was expected that participants would report decreased frequency of interparental conflict episodes post program participation, results in the opposite direction were actually found, with participants reporting a statistically significant mean increase in conflict frequency over time. Poor resolution of interparental conflict was also found to increase following program completion, with results reaching statistical significance. Overall, therefore, while some of the measured conflict dimensions were shown to improve in line with expectations following participation in the FMC PSPP, other conflict aspects were unexpectedly reported to worsen over time.

The increased frequency of conflict and poor resolution following completion of the program was somewhat surprising at first glance, given that the program was designed to reduce conflictual interactions between separated parents. However, on
closer inspection, this pattern of results is perhaps understandable. It is plausible that participation in the program disrupted participants’ typical patterns of interaction with their former partners by encouraging them to negotiate more frequently and approach interactions differently using the new communication strategies and conflict management methods imparted in the program, which is likely to throw the dynamics between parents somewhat into flux.

An initial deterioration of relationship dynamics in response to the introduction of an intervention is not uncommon in behavioural and clinical intervention studies. For example, Brandon (2006), in evaluating the *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting* program, found an increase in interparental conflict overall from pre-intervention to follow-up. This increase in conflict between parents following program participation alongside a simultaneous reported decrease in reported conflict behaviours that placed children in the middle led the author to conclude that, while participants had escalated in their disagreements with the other parent, they had learned the importance of shielding their children from the conflict. The author, however, did not offer an explanation as to why interparental conflict was reported to worsen following program completion despite some participants stating that they had benefited from the program in communications with their former partners. Further, the lack of a control group does not allow changes to be attributed to the program specifically, therefore it is difficult to interpret the findings in the Brandon (2006) study.

Forgatch and DeGarmo (1999) found a similar worsening of relationship dynamics in their randomized, experimental evaluation study of the *Parenting Through Change* program, reporting an increase in conflict bouts between parents and children at the 6-month follow-up point, followed by a decrease overall at the
12-month mark (i.e., a negative quadratic trajectory of change). Thus, as mothers were trained to implement new discipline strategies, a temporary increase in conflict bouts was produced. The authors attribute this trend of an initial increase in conflict scores after intervention followed by a subsequent decrease to the ‘struggle-work through hypothesis’. This hypothesis maintains that resistance to behavioural change in response to a new regime is likely, and problems will escalate in the initial stages. However, persistence in the use of the new behavioural strategies will eventually result in compliance and a decrease in problems. Although Forgatch and DeGarmo’s study targeted conflict between parents and children rather than between parents, it is possible that a similar process is at work in the current study, as participants are negotiating new ways of communicating and conflict-management strategies, and may be facing initial resistance from their former partners in return. Three months is relatively soon following the implementation of the program, and it is feasible that improved ex-partner interactions may become apparent at further follow-up.

Another possibility in explaining the increase in self-reported conflict is that parents initially may have had limited insight into the conflictual behaviours they were engaging in and exposing their children to. Thus, it is possible that the reporting and impact of conflict were under-reported at baseline through this lack of conscious awareness. Through program materials such as video demonstrations of damaging conflict behaviours, parents may have become more aware of their own behaviours and the impact of conflict on their children, which in turn may have led to an increase in reporting these behaviours at program completion.

Despite the significant increases in some of the destructive elements of interparental conflict, the improvements in relation to compromising and coparenting conflict suggest that participants were also able to learn some of the skills necessary
to manage their conflict more constructively. Examination of the items that make up the compromising subscale suggest that, as a consequence of undertaking the FMC PSPP, participants had improved their skills in relation to reasoning, smoothing things over and reaching a compromise with their former partners, and had also improved their listening skills and attempts to understand their former partner’s point of view and feelings. The decrease over time on the coparenting conflict subscale suggests that parents were also experiencing decreased difficulty negotiating with their former partners in relation to child care and parenting issues. The items on the resolution subscale assess whether participants are able to work out problems and arguments in a way that is satisfactory to them, that is, whether participants can ‘come up with a solution’ and whether they ‘stay mad’ or are able to be ‘friendly’ following an argument with their former partners.

Taken together, the improvements in compromising and coparenting conflict, coupled with the worsening of resolution, suggest that participants are attempting to implement and master some of the communication and conflict management skills taught in the program and are having some success in their ability to compromise in response to arguments and negotiate child-related matters; however, the resolutions to these interactions are not felt to be satisfactory for parents. Thus, the findings suggest that parents are becoming increasingly better at reaching compromises in relation to arguments, but they are not viewing compromise as a favourable resolution, or feeling particularly ‘friendly’ towards their former partners after reaching a compromise. This is unsurprising, given that many disputes between parents after separation occur in relation to childcare arrangements and the ideal resolution that most non-custodial parents desire is increased contact with their children (Devlin et al., 1992; Douglas, 2004). This, unfortunately, is difficult to achieve in many cases outside of litigation procedures so, while reaching a
compromise on these issues may be viewed as unsatisfactory in the eyes of parents, it could be considered realistic progress in this context.

The improvements seen in relation to interparental conflict in this study are significant, given that the current sample is a group of individuals assessed to be in chronic, entrenched and highly conflictual patterns of interaction with their former partners. The improvement found in relation to coparenting conflict is particularly noteworthy, given the association between this type of conflict and child distress, with children reporting higher levels of shame, self-blame, and fear of being drawn in to the conflict in response to parental arguments that are centred around child-related topics (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Thus, according to these findings the implications in relation to children’s wellbeing are particularly promising.

The improvements found in relation to conflict between separated parents are consistent with findings that reinforce the utility of post-separation parenting programs in addressing the issues many parents face in communicating and negotiating the care of children with their former partners following relationship dissolution (e.g., Cookston et al., 2006; Cookston & Fung, 2011; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999). The current thesis extends this research by evaluating the effects of such a program within an Australian sample. Further, the present findings in relation to interparental conflict highlight the importance of including multidimensional measures of conflict in research, given that the various conflict dimensions have the capacity to show contrasting change trajectories, with some aspects improving, and others concurrently remaining stable or worsening. The different aspects of interparental conflict evidently do not act in isolation and instead manifest concurrently to produce their effects on child adjustment and the parent-child relationship. Studies that are limited to unidimensional or global measures of
conflict, (e.g., including only a measure of conflict frequency or intensity) may therefore provide an inaccurate or incomplete assessment of interparental hostility and its many facets.

6.2.2 Impact of the program on parent adjustment (general psychological and separation-specific adjustment), child adjustment and the parent-child relationship.

6.2.2.1 Parent adjustment (general psychological and separation-specific adjustment). Hypotheses relating to parent adjustment received partial support. Thus, in relation to general psychological parental adjustment, a significant improvement in anxiety was found over time, while depression and stress were not found to significantly improve over the duration of the study. Results in relation to the separation-specific parental adjustment measures (i.e., former partner attachment and lonely negativity) also did not reach significance.

The significant results in relation to anxiety are most likely attributable to the focus of the program on practical relaxation strategies specifically targeted at reducing anxiety symptomatology, with a focus on progressive muscle relaxation – a technique shown to be particularly effective for this problem (Grawe, Donati, & Bernauer, 2001). Program participants were taught practical skills for managing anxiety symptoms in the sessions and were instructed to practice these skills for homework to promote further reinforcement and mastery. It is probable that participants found these concrete, practical anxiety strategies particularly accessible, given that the skills may be learned relatively easily and the benefits are apparent immediately which, in turn, makes it more likely that they may be utilised outside of
the program and produce the desired alleviation in anxiety symptomatology.

It is interesting to note, given the reduction in anxiety symptoms over time, that a concurrent significant reduction in stress was not also reported by participants. This is surprising as progressive muscle relaxation techniques have also shown effectiveness in relation to reducing tension and stress as well as anxiety (Grawe et al., 2001). However, the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) clearly differentiates the anxiety and stress constructs, and this factor structure has been confirmed and validated in research (e.g., Crawford & Henry, 2003). As such, the items that make up the anxiety subscale are characterised predominantly by physiological arousal symptoms such as dry mouth, breathing difficulties, heart sensations (increased heart rate or skipping a beat) and trembling, whereas those that pertain to the stress subscale are skewed towards more cognitive or psychological/emotional reactions such as over-reaction to situations, agitation and irritability. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that significant reductions were not found for both the anxiety and stress variables.

Secondly, perhaps a shift in stress levels in this group may be an unrealistic expectation for a number of reasons. Firstly, as outlined in Chapter 1, relationship breakdown is one of the most stressful life events that an individual may experience (e.g., Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Secondly, the study sample consisted of separated individuals assessed to be involved in relationships with their former partners characterised by high conflict. Thus, these individuals are likely to be embroiled in ongoing, stressful litigation related to the children. Thirdly, the program encourages the introduction of new communication and conflict management strategies in interactions with the former partner, the implementation of which may produce a temporary increase in conflict, and concomitant increases in stress within the
parental relationship in accordance with the ‘struggle-work through hypothesis’ outlined by Forgatch and DeGarmo (1999) and discussed in the previous paragraphs.

The lack of significant improvement in depression post-program was not surprising, given that the sample did not demonstrate elevated levels of depression at the first assessment. These low initial depression rates in the current sample of individuals, with an average time of 3 years since separation or divorce, accord with some previous research that has found that while difficulties in some aspects of postseparation adjustment (e.g., parenting) often persist over time and may become chronic, the individual psychological adjustment of most separated adults will improve over time (Amato, 2001; Halford & Sweeper, in press; Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Thus, the current findings coupled with this previous research suggest that depression may be more a feature of the early adjustment phase following separation.

6.2.3 Impact of the program on child adjustment. While a slight average decrease in parents’ perceptions of child adjustment problems was found over time in line with the hypotheses, the results did not reach statistical significance. Thus, it cannot be concluded that program participation led to enhanced outcomes for children at this stage. The lack of significant changes in child adjustment in the current study is not surprising, as past research examining the efficacy of parenting programs has resulted in similar findings across numerous evaluation studies in the PSPP field (e.g., Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Arbuthnot, Kramer & Gordon, 1997; Buehler et al., 1992; Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Kramer & Washo, 1993). The lack of significant improvement in the child adjustment domain in the current program evaluation may be attributable to the increase in some elements of interparental conflict across the program given the link between interparental conflict and child adjustment established widely in the literature (e.g., Grych et al., 1992) and outlined
in Chapter 1. Although the participants in the sample who completed the program were found to argue with their former partners more constructively in that they were negotiating parenting issues more effectively and reaching compromises more often, the positive flow-on effects to their children may have been offset by increases in the more destructive conflict dimensions such as frequency and poor resolution, which have been shown to be particularly detrimental to children’s wellbeing (Grych & Fincham, 1990, 1993). Given the complex pattern of findings in relation to interparental conflict in the current study, with improvements in the constructive aspects of conflict and paradoxical deterioration in some of the other more destructive dimensions, a 3-month follow-up assessment may be insufficient to determine the effects of the program on child adjustment. This line of reasoning is concordant with Kramer et al. (1998) who, upon finding that neither of the PSPPs evaluated in their study produced significant changes in parent-rated child behavior problems, suggested that a 3-month follow-up period is insufficient to allow for child adjustment outcomes to become evident (e.g., Kramer et al., 1998).

In finding no direct benefit to child adjustment in the first year post-intervention, Forgatch and DeGarmo (1999) also argued that effects on child adjustment are unlikely in the initial period following an intervention. These authors suggest that the acquisition and implementation of new parenting practices is likely to take a significant amount of time as parents attempt to master different strategies targeted at different child problems (for example, discipline strategies aimed at reducing antisocial behaviours and incentive strategies aimed at promoting prosocial behaviours). FMC PSPP participants may therefore have learned the parenting skills required to facilitate behaviour changes, however it may take some time before the positive impact of skill training on child wellbeing becomes apparent. Thus, benefits in relation to child adjustment may take several months or years to manifest. Such
As discussed in the introductory chapters of this thesis, parental divorce places children at risk for many detrimental outcomes (including internalising and externalising problems, academic and social difficulties), thus obtaining positive child adjustment outcomes in separated and divorced samples is no small challenge. Also, according to the research discussed in the preceding paragraphs, it appears that changes do not manifest immediately following parental participation in a PSPP, and may in fact become evident only after a significant time period (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999; Kramer et al., 1998). The results of the current study must therefore be considered encouraging, given that changes in child adjustment were observed in a positive direction, even though these changes had not reached statistical significance by the 3-month follow-up point.

6.2.4 Impact of the program on the parent-child relationship. The results in relation to the parent-child relationship remained relatively stable across all time-points of the study, and in contrast to hypotheses, did not reach statistical significance. Moreover, the findings of the present study were contrary to the results of other long-term, skills-based programs that have examined the effects of a treatment program on the parent-child relationship. For example, evaluations of both the Parenting Through Change program (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999) and the New Beginnings program (Wolchik et al., 2000) demonstrated that teaching parenting skills in the program led to an enhancement of the parent-child relationship. Importantly, however, these programs were longer in duration (14 sessions and 13 sessions, respectively), and were thus able to incorporate more extensive material centred around parenting skills and the parent-child relationship than the current program. It is possible that the FMC PSPP currently does not provide sufficient...
coverage of material targeting the parent-child relationship to yield improvements in this domain.

Alternatively, there may be other reasons explaining the lack of significant improvement in the parent-child domain. It was observed that mean scores on the Care scale of the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), which was adapted in this study as an assessment of participant's own parenting, were relatively high at baseline in this sample. The mean score of 29.29 was higher in this sample than the mean score of 25.35 for the normative sample (across both genders) in the original paper outlining the development of the measure (Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979), suggesting that the current sample may be described as particularly caring in their relationship with their children when compared to normative data. One explanation that must be considered, therefore, is that the current sample were genuinely high on this scale and therefore had little room for improvement across the study. Alternatively, it must also be considered that the consistently high sample scores on this scale across the study may be attributable to participant biases in responding. Interestingly, the Care scale scores in the current separated and divorced sample were even higher than the score of 27.8 (the composite mean averaged across both mothers and fathers) found in Atkinson's (2004) study that employed the same adapted version of the measure in a sample of intact families. On inspection of the item means that make up the subscale, it may be seen that the parents in the current sample are reporting that they are particularly caring, affectionate, encouraging and understanding in their relationships with their children, which may be considered unusual given that this is a sample of individuals coping with the particularly stressful event of relationship dissolution and locked in patterns of high conflict with the other parent. Indeed, parental relationship breakdown has often been linked to a deterioration in parenting practices (e.g., Amato, 1993; Cummings & Davies, 1994),
and interparental conflict has been linked to poorer quality parent-child relationships in the literature (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001). Therefore, it is conceivable that social desirability effects are at play here, given that assessment was achieved via self-report only. Response bias in this context would not be surprising given that separating and divorcing individuals are often involved in the adversarial system fighting for child custody, and who may be all too aware of the need to present as ‘good parents’.

6.3 Limitations

Although the results of the current study are promising, it is important to note specific methodological aspects of the current study that may have affected the findings. Firstly, the sample size was relatively limited for a number of reasons. Conducting longitudinal research with separated and divorced individuals is challenging due to the practical difficulties this population is often experiencing in relation to finances, time availability, and childcare that may result in a reluctance or inability to engage in the demands of participating in such applied research studies. Further, individuals may often be mobile or transient following a relationship separation, making them difficult to track over time for multiple or extended follow-up assessments (Sweeper, 2004). The small sample size in the current study may have decreased the chances of detecting further significant changes in the target variables, if indeed they existed. Also, the statistically significant changes that were detected were not large changes and this must be noted in interpreting the results. Further, most of the measures employed in the current study did not provide or allow for the determination of clinical cut-off points, therefore it was not possible to ascertain the clinical significance of the measured changes for participants in the current study. The use of a measure of conflict with clinical cut-off scores to assess
participant eligibility for the program may also have provided a more objective method of recruitment to the study.

While the manual was developed in conjunction with Family Mediation Centre facilitators and researchers were present for training purposes, the facilitators were instructed to employ the manual content flexibly to adhere to individual group needs in accordance with the recommendations of Kendall (1998, 2000) and fidelity to the manual was not formally monitored. Therefore, we cannot be sure that there was ‘adequate intervention integrity’. However, while it is not known if the program content in the current treatment groups was administered in an alternative sequence to that presented in the manual, the importance of adhering to the essential components of the manual was emphasised to facilitators, as this is considered to be the key recommendation for successful program delivery in research (Addis et al, 1999; Duncan, 2004; Kendall, 1998 and 2000; Wilson, 1996). Therefore, although the program material may have been presented in a non-linear sequence by the facilitators, one may be confident that the core content of the manual was delivered intact, which is the key to effective program facilitation.

The current study was also limited in its exclusive use of self-report measures of interparental conflict, parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship, and on the sole reliance of parental reports in assessing child adjustment. These factors may have contributed to method effects in the data such as social desirability. Reports from multiple informants (i.e., teachers or children themselves) and the use of multiple methods (i.e., interviews and observations) would certainly have assisted to eliminate such method effects. Especially given that multiple-informant and multi-method approaches to such research can yield different perspectives on change in parent and child outcomes (e.g., Grych et al., 1992; Lebow & Gurman, 1995). While
conducting multi-method assessments were not feasible in the current study due to budget, time and ethical constraints, future program evaluations would do well to incorporate other sources of assessment alongside the collection of data from multiple informants.

Another critique of the current study may be the lack of random assignment to comparison groups, especially given that randomisation is considered a cornerstone of stringent, controlled research (e.g., Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik & Braver, 2011). Further, the fact that the waitlist control period was shorter than the intervention and because of the nested design, could not be directly compared to the intervention group, may also be considered limitations of the research. However, evaluative studies carried out in community settings are more limited than those implemented in university or laboratory settings where variables are more easily controlled. Attempts were made to design a study that was rigorous in its design within the constraints of applied field research that fulfilled its duty of care and service provision requirements rather than implementing a highly controlled efficacy trial with little generalisability to natural service delivery settings.

Furthermore, although the collection of qualitative data was considered to be beyond the scope of the current doctoral project, this may be considered to be a weakness of the study. Post-program interviews, and indeed pre-program interviews with the participants would no doubt have yielded some insights not captured by the quantitative data, and may have served to identify those in need of further counselling or therapy to further reinforce any gains of the program.

Despite these limitations, the current study is enhanced by several strengths. Firstly, the program development was informed by an extensive review of the literature, thus all elements, including program length, format, targeted participants,
program materials and content, were evidence-based in design and in line with current program effectiveness research. Secondly, the evaluation utilised an extensive range of established and psychometrically sound set of outcome variables, and did not rely solely on consumer satisfaction reports or court records to assess program effectiveness. Thirdly, the current evaluation study included a range of measures assessing the various dimensions of interparental conflict. This feature of the study is noteworthy, as the majority of studies in the PSPP field are limited to unidimensional or global assessments of the conflict construct. Fourthly, given the limitations inherent in carrying out evaluative research in community settings, a further strength of the current study was its utilisation of pre- and post-assessments with a 3-month follow-up, and included a waitlist control group for comparison.

6.4 Implications and Directions for Future Research

There are a number of possible revisions to the current program and directions for future research that may be recommended in going forward. Firstly, the findings in relation to increased poor resolution of conflict suggest a need for greater emphasis in the program on skill-building conflict resolution exercises. While an increase in compromising during interparental arguments was viewed as an improvement for program participants in relation to managing hostility, it is clear that compromising and resolving conflicts are quite separate dimensions that must be addressed individually within the program. It is likely that participants would benefit from having more opportunity to practice resolving conflict during program sessions through experiential exercises such as role plays, vignettes and group discussion that are oriented towards negotiation and effective resolution of conflict. Thus a stronger focus on these areas may be implemented within the program in future to more effectively address the poor resolution skills apparent in separating individuals
locked in chronic and entrenched patterns of conflict with their former partner. Further, as discussed earlier, the ideal resolution that most parents desire is greater access to their children. However, this is often an unrealistic outcome for most separated parents in highly conflictual coparenting relationships involving court proceedings. Thus, it would be worthwhile in the future to incorporate material focusing on realistic expectations regarding the management of conflict in relation to child access.

Another suggested revision to the program is to include a more extensive focus on teaching parenting skills aimed at enhancing the parent-child relationship. Should future budget and practical considerations allow, it would be useful to extend the program length to reflect the number of sessions included in the *Parenting Through Change* (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999) and *New Beginnings* (Wolchik et al., 2000) programs, which both produced parent-child relationship benefits to participants through their more extensive coverage of parent-child relationship material. Further, although beyond the scope of the current research study due to budgetary restraints, the development and implementation of a parallel program for children to run concurrently alongside the parent program could provide further benefits in relation to both the parent-child relationship and child adjustment domains. The program could work in tandem with the parent program in providing information and teaching coping skills related to parental separation and divorce to children. The benefits to consider include the opportunity to provide a ‘double-barrelled’ intervention targeting both parents and children as well as an opportunity for structured child care while parents attend the program. However, the implementation of a child component to the program would require careful consideration, given the additive costs and increased personnel, training and space associated with introducing parallel programming for children. Further, as discussed
in the introductory chapters of this thesis, studies have been inconclusive as to whether running dual-component programs for parents and children provides benefits beyond parent-only programs, thus this requires more extensive investigation in research.

A further recommendation is the addition of booster sessions following completion of the program. These sessions could review salient program content and review progress with participants in order to preserve and maintain any benefits achieved through program participation, and provide ongoing support and information. Alternatively, ongoing contact with participants may be achieved via the provision of electronic or printed newsletters or information sheets, or through an online chat room or question and answer forum. This medium of therapy utilising electronic technology has demonstrated efficacy in the literature and continues to gain widespread popularity (e.g., Andersson, 2006; Postel, de Haan & De Jong, 2008).

Aside from recommended adjustments to the program, some directions for future evaluation research are also suggested. Firstly, given the potential for social desirability effects when relying upon self-report assessment, particularly in a vulnerable population such as separating parents who are likely to be involved in court proceedings related to their children, future research would benefit from including complementary assessment methods such as child and teacher reports. Obtaining assessments from the child directly would have the added advantage of access to the protective factors that are thought to reduce a child’s vulnerability to poor adjustment outcomes (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Davies & Cummings, 1994). Such protective factors are central to theories of conflict and child adjustment outlined in the introductory chapters of this thesis, such as the cognitive-contextual
model (Grych & Fincham, 1990) and the emotional security hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and include cognitive appraisals (e.g., self-blame and threat) and coping responses (e.g., emotion-focused versus problem-focused coping). The inclusion of child reports in future program evaluations would therefore provide insight into the mechanisms proposed by these theories, and provide greater clarification in relation to the impact of interparental hostility on children’s wellbeing and the effectiveness of implemented interventions in enhancing outcomes for children. Further, including observational data of parent-child interactions (such as those implemented in Wolchik et al.’s [2000] study) would also serve to strengthen the design of future studies and increase the likelihood of obtaining complementary forms of data in relation to child adjustment and the parent-child relationship.

Furthermore, in line with the possibility that a 3-month follow-up period may be inadequate to detect changes in some of the measured variables, longer-term follow-up assessments are also recommended in future program evaluations. The implementation of a more extended follow-up period would allow for a better understanding of the durability of change — a point noted by Lebow and Gurman (1995). Further, if delayed program effects (in line with the ‘struggle-work through hypothesis’) are at play here, we would expect improvements in outcomes to become evident with more extended follow-up timeframes. Further, while examination of clinical change was unable to be carried out due to sample size limitations and the employment of some measures that did not provide cut-off scores, future research would benefit by employing an assessment of clinical change.

Finally, the current sample was primarily of Anglo-Australian background, thus results are not necessarily generalisable to separated and divorced parents of
other ethnicities. It is recommended that cultural factors in relation to separation and 
divorce are investigated in future program research and that the findings are used to 
tailor programs that address the needs of cultural groups more appropriately.

6.5 Summary and Conclusions

As outlined in the introductory chapters of this thesis, a plethora of different 
post-separation parenting programs have been developed and implemented across 
Western nations. However, relatively few of these programs have been subject to 
rigorous documentation and evaluation, particularly in Australia. This thesis, based 
upon an extensive review of the literature, sought to design and implement a PSPP 
targeted at separated and divorced parents in entrenched patterns of conflict with 
their former partners. Following implementation of the program across Melbourne 
branches of the Victorian Family Mediation Centre, an evaluation study was carried 
out to determine the effectiveness of the program in relation to interparental conflict, 
parent and child adjustment, and the parent-child relationship domains.

The results of the evaluation study suggest that, despite the entrenched 
conflictual relationships experienced by parents, the difficulties they experience in 
relation to their relationships with their former partners, and their reports of their 
own adjustment and that of their children, is somewhat responsive to treatment and 
amenable to change. Thus, it appears that participation in a multiple-session, skills-
based post-separation parenting program does indeed have some utility in addressing 
some of the issues parents face in relation to coparenting, managing relationships 
with their former partners and children, and their own wellbeing following separation 
or divorce. However, the fact that some of the results in the current study were not in 
the hypothesised direction highlights the difficulty in producing positive change in a 
 sample of separating and divorcing parents in persistently conflictual relationships
with their former partners. For the reasons outlined in the introductory chapters of this thesis, relationship dissolution can be one of the most disruptive and traumatic events that an individual may experience, with emotional, social and financial consequences (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato & Booth, 1991; Doherty, Su, & Needle, 1989; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Smyth, 2004). Most researchers in the field have suggested that separation adjustment difficulties are most prominent soon after separation and usually improve over time (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1994; Davies, Avison & McAlpine, 1997; Mastekaasa, 1994). Therefore, given that the current sample comprised individuals who were 3 years post-separation on average, and whose interparental relationships were marked by chronic and persistent high levels of conflict, any gains imparted through program participation must be viewed as success, and renewed effort must be made to address the areas in which unexpected or contradictory outcomes were found.

Given the encouraging results found to date, there is reason to be optimistic that future refinements of the program and further elucidation of its mechanisms of action may lead to substantial improvements in the coparenting relationships of separated and divorced parents which, in turn, are likely to benefit the wellbeing and adjustment of these individuals and their children alike.
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APPENDIX A

Figure 1. Flow diagram of participant recruitment and progression through the *Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program*
Assessed for eligibility and recruited into study

\((n = 61)\)

Completed Waitlist Pre-Assessment

\((n = 18)\)

Completed Waitlist Post-Assessment

\((n = 18)\)

Completed Intervention Pre-Assessment

\((n = 43)\)

+ Addition of Waitlist Control after 1 month \((n = 18)\)

Completed Intervention Post-Assessment

\((n = 31)\)

Completed 3-month Follow-Up

\((n = 31)\)

Figure 1. Flow diagram of participant recruitment and progression through the Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program.
APPENDIX B

Ethics Approval Documents
MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr Susie Sweeper
    Psychology
    Burwood

FROM: Executive Officer, Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DU-HREC)

DATE: 24 August 2007

SUBJECT: Project EC 159-2007  (Please quote this project number in future communication.)
          Post separation parenting groups: Program development and evaluation

This application was considered at the DU-HREC meeting held on 25 June 2007

Approval has been given for Dr Susie Sweeper, School of Psychology, to undertake this project for a period of three years from 24 August 2007.

The approval given by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee is given only for the project and for the period as stated in the approval. It is your responsibility to contact the Secretary immediately should any of the following occur:
  • Serious or unexpected adverse effects on the participants
  • Any proposed changes in the protocol, including extensions of time.
  • Any events which might affect the continuing ethical acceptability of the project.
  • The project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
  • Modifications are requested by other HREC's.

In addition you will be required to report on the progress of your project at least once every year and at the conclusion of the project. Failure to report as required will result in suspension of your approval to proceed with the project.

Signature Redacted by Library

Silvia Rametta
On behalf of DU-HREC
(03) 9251 7123
APPENDIX C

Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program Brochures and Leader’s Manual
ARE YOU HAVING PROBLEMS TALKING TO YOUR FORMER PARTNER?

DO YOU OFTEN FIGHT WITH YOUR FORMER PARTNER ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

HAS THE SEPARATION AFFECTED YOUR CHILDREN?

DO YOU FEEL SAD SINCE THE SEPARATION?

ARE YOU HAPPY WITH THE CURRENT PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS?

ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT GOING TO COURT?

If you answered yes to any of the questions opposite, then attending a post separation parenting group at the Family Mediation Centre might assist you.

The aim of the group is to improve your parenting relationship with your former partner.

The content of program includes:

Feelings of Loss
Children’s needs
Communication
Problem Solving
Managing Conflict
Parenting Styles
Moving on
The groups run for between 6 to 8 weeks (1 session per week for 2 hours each).

As well as learning lots of new information about parenting after separation, you will have the opportunity to hear how other members of the group are going.

Cost: $10 per session

The courses are run at Ringwood, Narre Warren and Moorabbin.

For details on when and where the course is next being run phone 9555 9300
FAMILY MEDIATION CENTRE

POST SEPARATION PARENTING PROGRAM

(FMC PSPP)

LEADER’S MANUAL
Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to all the staff at FMC who have over the years been conducting these efficacious programs. A particular thank you goes to Meg Henham, Kim Fraser and Anthony Grimes for handing over their very well developed and sophisticated notes and procedures on PSPPs, which has made the task of developing this manual a lot easier.

Acknowledgement is also made to the other programs and projects whose activities have been adapted for use in this program. In particular, material was adapted from the New Beginnings program by Wolchik and colleagues, Back on Track, an initiative of the Child Support Agency (2000), and Mom’s House Dad’s House, developed by Ricci (1997). In addition, many of the handouts have been sourced from the Parenting and Child Health Australian website (http://www.cyh.com). Sources are acknowledged throughout.

Dr Susie Sweeper and Gillian Campbell
Program Outline

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Introduction and PSPP Preparation
This manual contains information in relation to facilitating the Family Mediation Centre Post-Separation Parenting Program (PSPP). The need to develop a manual has come from the increased popularity in PSPPs in recent years, which has in turn facilitated the need for standardised programs that have proven effectiveness based on research. This manual integrates and synthesises the material used at the various FMCs and builds on this with some additional material.

This course is based on the principles of self-directed learning, which is based on the concept that the individual manages their own learning to facilitate change. Hence, the program focuses on how the participant can change their own feelings, thoughts and behaviours rather than that of others. Change might be in relation to communication with the ex-partner, the management of separation-related distress, or the parenting of children. The aim of the program is to reduce conflict associated with relationship separation and to decrease the negative effects of conflict on children.

**APPLYING THE MANUAL**

Each centre at FMC runs the PSPPs a little differently and it is these differences that bring the PSPP alive. It is also the different skills and personalities of the individual facilitators that make each group so dynamic and successful. While the manual is designed to assist facilitators in the planning and running of the program, and provides the essential content to be covered, it may be employed flexibly to meet the needs of the organization, facilitators and, most importantly, the participant!
PREPARATION FOR A PROGRAM

Assessment of Participant Suitability

It is imperative that the facilitators have contact with the participants prior to the first PSPP session to assess suitability to participate. At a minimum, a phone conversation is required for the facilitator to make this assessment. If unsure, have a face-to-face initial session with the client. The program is applicable to most parents who have experienced a relationship separation, however there are some contraindications to inclusion in the group. Assessment of suitability should consider the following:

- Suicidal ideation
- Thought disorder likely to interfere with ability to process the information and interact with the other participants
- Very angry participants who are unlikely to contain their emotions
- Troublesome symptoms or behaviours such as limited insight, or very verbose speech.
- Domestic violence

Clients who are assessed as unsuitable may require some initial one-on-one individual counselling to help them prepare for participation in a future PSPP. At times some participants may become difficult throughout the program. It is appropriate to disallow them to attend future sessions or to work with them between sessions to help them behave / interact in a more acceptable fashion.

Group Size and Format

The optimal number of participants is about 8 to 10. Expect attrition in each group. Experience also shows that 8 sessions seems to be about the right number of sessions to keep people engaged and to cover the material thoroughly. Generally the sessions are 2 hours each and a break is conducted in the middle.
Facilitator Roles and Group Process

Before starting any program you must work out who is going to facilitate the program. While there are no strict guidelines as to who is most appropriate, the FMC has found that having two facilitators (preferably one male and one female) works particularly well.

While this manual provides the content, it is intended to be used flexibly. Therefore, it will be up to the facilitators to work out the process of the group (ie. how the group will run, facilitator roles etc) and to operationalise the delivery of the information prior to the commencement of the program. Some of the sessions contain several activities. You don’t have to do them all! Or you may choose to put some off until the next session. The decision regarding the delivery of the information will most likely be based on the number of participants, the group dynamics and facilitator preference. It may be preferable to map out each session with a proforma (such as the one contained on page 9).

The participants are given several handouts throughout the course. It might be useful to create a folder for each participant in which to keep all their handouts. A title page (such as the one on page 10) may be attached to the front of the folder.

The Importance of Research

The push for evidenced-based practise is strong. Funding often relies on programs demonstrating they work. Therefore it is imperative that each PSPP is evaluated. At present this means obtaining pre, post and 3 month follow up questionnaires. Discuss with participants the importance of completing the questionnaires for quality assurance, program improvement and continued government funding requirements!
PSPP PLANNING PROFORMA

Date:

Session Number:

Location:

Facilitators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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Post Separation Parenting Program

Family Mediation Centre

Handouts

Name: ____________________________________
Session 1

Introduction to the Program, Goals
& Impact of Interparental Conflict on Children
As participants come into the room or as they are greeted at reception give them a name tag.

Starting off the Session

- **START ON TIME!** This is vital from the outset as it sets the standard and prevents participants forming an expectation that it is acceptable to turn up late.
- Welcome participants and introduce yourself and any other facilitators.
- Inform the group that an agenda will be set at the beginning of each session so that they know what to expect for the evening.

Session 1 Agenda

1. Housekeeping
2. Participant Introductions
3. Guidelines
4. Expectations
5. Introducing the Impact of Conflict on Children
6. Course outline
7. Children’s Reactions to Separation
8. My Child’s Rights in Relation to the Separation
9. Video: *Consider the Children*
10. Solutions to Separation Problems for Children
11. Homework
12. Conclusion

1. **Housekeeping**

Discuss the length of the course, the timing (eg. 2 hours each week), fees, location of toilets, break times, the importance of being on time each week etc...
2. Participant Introductions
Ask participants to share their name, names and ages of their children and a brief statement as to why they are here. The facilitator is to summarise the reasons why the participants are here and to point out areas of convergence and divergence between participants. As a facilitator make sure to memorise the children’s names as well!

*The Family Tree Exercise:* In this exercise draw a tree on the white board and for each participant write their name on a branch and their children’s names stemming from the branch. On the trunk of the tree write ‘PSPP’ and write the names of the facilitators on the roots of the tree (as adapted by Wolchik).

3. Guidelines
Use the whiteboard and discuss guidelines of the program. Make sure you try and include the following:

1. Respect for all members. Everyone here has different experiences and we must all respect those individual differences. Try not to ridicule or criticise other members of the group.
2. Speak one at a time. No interrupting. Listen to other group members.
3. Participate as best you can. Articulate to the group that: “This means you do not have to disclose everything. There may be some issues you do not want to discuss in the whole group. You may like to talk to me about them at the end of the session. Or you may not. Remember just disclose as much as you feel comfortable. Though I do believe that one of the benefits of having a group like this is that you can learn from each other. I think the key is just feel comfortable about what you disclose”.
4. If you have questions please ask them as we go
5. Attempt homework assignments
6. Confidentiality. No discussing of individual cases outside of this room. It is ok to talk about what you learn however with other people
7. Be punctual
8. No aggressive behaviour. Know what your buttons are and try to self-regulate your emotions – do not be triggered. Respond respectfully when you have a different point of view.

At the end of this exercise, print a copy from the whiteboard, photocopy and hand a copy to each participant.

4. Expectations

Use the whiteboard and write the heading “Great Expectations”. Ask the participants “What do you hope to achieve from attending this program” and write down the participants’ responses.

Responses usually include the following:

I would like to learn…

- How to protect the kids from the harm/effects of conflict
- How I can support my children
- How I can talk to my children
- How I can talk with my ex
- How to parent long distance
- How to deal with my ex when we don’t like each other.

In this part of the program communicate to the participants that: ‘An essential purpose of the program is to help our children adjust to the separation. And the way we can do that is through working to meet some of these expectations.’
5. Introducing the Impact of Conflict on Children

Point out that perhaps the most important aim of the program is to reduce conflict between ex partners which in turn will benefit the children.

Introduce the impact of parental conflict on children as follows:

“Children are very sensitive to conflict between their parents, and they can be badly affected by conflict which continues after separation. Research shows quite clearly that conflict between parents is the most critical factor which affects children's adjustment after separation. Children who feel that they are 'the meat in the sandwich' are the ones who are the most seriously affected by the conflict. If the conflict between parents continues, children may become distressed every time they go from one parent to the other. They may feel pressure to take sides. They may have ongoing problems at school, and, at worst, their development may be seriously hampered. Children who witness intense conflict or violence between parents are at risk of developing long-term emotional problems. The effect on children of seeing or hearing a parent being hurt is similar to the child being hurt themselves.”

Assure participants that ways to manage and reduce interparental conflict will be addressed throughout the program.

6. Course Outline

Give participants the ‘Course Outline’ handout (attached below) and relate this structure back to their expectations. Ask the group how this course outline looks to them. Depending on the group needs and characteristics, you may want to discuss some changes to the course structure e.g., swapping weeks or the content around a little. You may like to leave it open and juggle content as you go along, according to the needs and characteristics of the group at hand.
# Course Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to the Program, Goals and Introducing the Impact of Conflict on Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Impact of Separation on Me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Managing my Relationship with my Former Partner Part 1: Parenting Styles, Conflict, Anger Management, Assertion and Problem-Solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Managing my Relationship with my Former Partner: Part 2: Parenting Coalitions, Troubleshooting and Supporting My Child’s Relationship with the Other Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Parenting Skills Part 1: Managing My Relationship With My Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parenting Skills Part 2: Love and Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Parenting Review, Legal Issues and Finances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A Review of Things Learned and Moving On: Where to From Here, Dating, Setbacks and Beyond</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Children’s Reactions to Separation

Divide the whiteboard into two sections with a line down the middle. On the first half write “Changes/Losses for Children”. Ask participants to name some of the losses and/or changes their children have experienced since the separation. On the second column on the board write the heading ‘Children’s Concerns About/Reactions to Separation’ and ask the participants for their responses.

Responses may include some of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes/ Losses for Children</th>
<th>Children’s Concerns About/Reactions To Separation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moving schools</td>
<td>Fears of abandonment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not seeing Mum/Dad as often</td>
<td>Feeling sad about less time with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving house</td>
<td>Feeling caught in the middle between parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing a sense of security</td>
<td>Becoming really quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving away from best friends</td>
<td>Becoming very naughty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not seeing mum and dad fighting</td>
<td>Wetting the bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining a new step-parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Point out that the issues in the two columns can be related, and that children don’t have as good or well developed coping mechanisms as adults and sometimes this is why they misbehave in response to these issues.

Invite participants to share whether they have noticed any changes in their children since separation. Remember to normalise their responses where necessary, although make sure to emphasise that while their responses may be normal, they still need your parental attendance.
Provide the ‘How Children React to Separation’ handout (attached below) as a reference point.
How Children React to Separation

Children feel insecure and powerless when they see their family break-up. Children go through a grieving process, but show it differently from adults. However, because they probably don't really understand why it is happening they often feel:

- Shocked, angry and sad about the loss of the family unit
- Abandoned or rejected by the parent who leaves
- Afraid that if one parent has 'left' the other one may also leave
- Confused about whether it is all right to love the parent who no longer lives with them
- Guilty, as though the separation must somehow be their fault
- Worried about the parent who is not living with them.

How children cope with loss

Children don't show their pain and suffering all at once. They may seem to have got over it and then suddenly it reappears. Children, especially young ones, often don't have the words to express themselves clearly, so they can show their grief in different ways. Some may:

- Become aggressive or 'naughty'
- Withdraw
- Become 'clingy'
- Act younger than their age, eg children who have been toilet-trained may start to wet or soil again
- Have nightmares, or find it hard to go to sleep
- Change their eating patterns
- Try to be really good at school and at home, and because they appear to be coping, it's easy to think they are not suffering
- Try to stand up for the parent who is being put down. Some try to protect the parent who seems the weaker
- Show anger and hostility in play, with their toys, with brothers and sisters, with their friends or with you
- Show problems in their behaviour and get punished, which makes them feel worse
- Do well at school. Others can't concentrate and slip backwards

Being aware of the sort of feelings your child is going through may help you to understand your child's behaviour. Most children are confused and fearful about what will happen. Some are ashamed. They might not say to you what is worrying them because they don't want to see you upset or angry.
### Some of the Questions Children May Have in Relation to the Separation:

- Who is responsible for me?
- Will the house be sold?
- What if Mum and Dad cannot agree about us?
- Can I decide who I live with?
- Will I have to change schools?
- What will happen to my pets?
- Can I still see my friends?
- Will there be enough money to do the things we did before?
- What will I do if my other parent leaves or gets sick?
- If I am separated from my brothers and sisters, will we still see each other?
- Can I have a say about when I see my Dad if I’m not living with him?
- Can I make phone calls at any time to my other parent?
- How can I tell my friends what’s happening?

All these feelings are very normal and just as strong as your own. The only difference is that as an adult you are in a position to make choices and take some control over the decisions. Your children on the other hand feel extremely vulnerable and powerless. It is even more scary when children hear you talking about going to court - this is often linked with doing something wrong or breaking the law.

### Children's Needs at Different Ages

All children need to feel loved by both parents. Parents need to think first of their children's needs before and above their own needs. Children need to know that both parents will still be there to look after them and be involved in their lives. (This may not always be the case.)

#### Birth to 2 years of age

- Highly dependent on those who look after them
- Will almost certainly be very physically and emotionally dependent on the parent who has done most of the day to day care; separation from that parent for any lengthy period can be very traumatic for the child
- Have a very different understanding of time from adults; several hours can seem an eternity; the night world can also be very different (and scary) for them
- Can be extremely sensitive to conflict between their parents
- Will often fret for the absent parent, especially if it is the parent they feel closest to
- Need short but frequent periods of contact. When the contact parent has not previously been very involved with the child, it may be useful for the day to day parent to be present, at least at first. If this is too difficult, someone whom the child is comfortable with can help ease the situation.
### 3-5 years

- Are a little less dependent on their parents
- Usually have a basic understanding of what separation means; it can feel like a major crisis
- Have more of a sense of time than younger children, but a short period of time still seems much longer than for adults
- Often fret for the absent parent - things like photos and phone calls can be useful
- May cope with being away from their day to day parent overnight if they are well prepared; conflict between parents will make children less likely to cope with overnight contact
- Are sensitive to one parent criticising the other, and may take it as criticism of themselves
- Often imagine what they don't understand. They may talk about what they wish for as if it is true so you can't always take everything they say at face value . . . while not telling lies, they may in fact be telling their truth rather than your truth.

### 6-8 years

- Are more able to talk about their feelings
- Often fantasise about getting their parents back together
- May try and look after their parents, both the parent they live with and the parent they visit, who is often seen as being all alone
- May try to take responsibility for arrangements when their parents cannot agree
- May blame themselves for the separation
- Often express their feelings through behaviour problems, learning problems at school and physical symptoms like headaches and pains
- Are usually comfortable with overnight visits, holidays of a week or so, and longer periods between visits, eg alternate weekends

### 9-11 years

- Can usually talk about their own feelings and are able to partly understand the experiences and feelings of others
- Are often very aware of feeling 'in the middle' of the parents
- Sometimes try to get their parents back together
- Can take sides, becoming one parent's 'soldier', especially when the conflict between the parents is high
- Can cope with contact which is less frequent and for longer periods, and can also usually cope with travelling distances to visit a parent or relatives
- Need to keep up their activities, sports, other groups and friendships, so contact plans need to take into account the child's wishes and the child's activities particularly on weekends
- Can have meaningful contact with mail, phone calls, faxes, email and video recordings.
12-16 years

Adolescence involves greater independence from parents and is a difficult time generally, so a separation can be an added burden.

- Need time and space to work out their own feelings about their parents' separation
- Develop their own sense of right and wrong; they can be critical of either or both parents' behaviour
- Can react to separation by becoming rebellious
- Can easily play one parent off against the other to escape parental control, eg move from house to house
- Can react with anger and rejection if pressured by either parent
- Often take on a lot of responsibility for a parent, for their brothers and sisters, or for household tasks
- Need flexibility so that contact plans are based around the teenagers' wishes. When making arrangements both parents need to talk it over with them and take their wishes and activities into account.

NB: (This information was sourced from ‘Parenting and Child Health’. This is an Australian website providing resources to parents regarding child development (http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=99&id=1742#3)
8. My Child’s Rights in Relation to the Separation

Ask the group what they think their children’s rights in relation to separation are, and write on the whiteboard.

Examples might include:

- To be safe
- To see both parents
- To have their basic needs met (e.g., love, food, shelter)
- To be happy and secure
- To express how they feel and have a voice
- To maintain the same lifestyle as to when parents where together
- To not have to choose between mum and dad
- To hear the truth (Tell the group that this one is tricky and that we will be discussing the importance of issues such as truth later on).

Ask the group how their children fare. Let them know that this program is about ensuring these rights are honoured and maintained.

9. Video: Consider the Children

Watch video and debrief participants in relation to their reactions to the video

Provide “Children – Thinking, Feeling, Hearing” handout
Children – Thinking, Feeling, Hearing

**Misconceptions or faulty beliefs children often hold after a separation**

- Self-blame for the separation, i.e. “If I had not been so naughty than Mum and Dad would still be together”
- Children can often feel abandoned and rejected by the parent who moves elsewhere.
- Children have a tendency to fill in the gaps of missing information with fantasy.
- If Mum and Dad loved each other before and now they don’t, they might stop loving me too.

**What children most want to know**

- Mum and Dad will continue to love me
- Mum and Dad will stop fighting
- Both Mum and Dad will be here in my life

**What children need to hear**

- We will continue to take care of you and provide for you and keep you safe.
- While Mum and Dad’s feeling have changed for each other, our feelings will never change for you.
- Your relationship with your sisters, brothers, grandparents & friends will continue.
- You did not cause the separation and no one thinks that.
- We will listen to any wishes you may have but we make the decisions. You do not have to worry about making any decisions.
- We are not going to ask you to take sides.
- You might wish we would get back together, and that is natural but it is not going to happen. We are sorry that this hurts you so much.

**What children do not want to hear**

- The separation is the other parents fault
- Your Mum/Dad was having an affair/ spent all the money/ has personality problems.
- Denigration of the other parent
10. Solutions to Separation Problems for Children

Inform participants that in this program we will be working towards solving some of the problems children face after relationship separation by helping parents achieve the following:

- Increase positive and warm contact between you and your children
- Keep kids out of the ‘war zone’ of divorce
- Support the relationship between your children and the other parent
- Improve parenting and discipline skills
- Be consistent with the above changes. Stability is very important

11. Homework

Discuss with them that homework is a very important part of the program because it gives participants a chance to put into action what is learned in each session, ie. ‘Outside the sessions is where all the benefits occur when you apply what you learn!’

Ask them to fill in the Help for Children of Any Age and the Goals and Expectations forms (attached below) for homework to be discussed at the next session.

12. Conclusion

Recap what you have done this session and what the participant can expect next session. Let them know that this session has been about defining how the group will operate, what to expect from the program and discussing the impact of separation on children. Let them know that next session is a little more about how they are doing after the separation. From then on the course is focused more on the well-being of their children.
Help for Children of Any Age

Use a coloured pen to check the things you are already doing to help your children adjust to the separation. Use a different coloured pen to underline the things you would like to work on some more.

☐ I reassure my children that this separation is not their fault.
☐ I do not talk negatively, or with anger, about my partner to my children. If I cannot talk positively, I limit what I say.
☐ I try to avoid arguing bitterly in front of my kids.
☐ I try to agree with the other parent about disciplinary matters at least in the presence of the children.
☐ I am making special efforts to maintain individual relations with each child.
☐ I assure my children that it is okay to love the absent parent.
☐ I do not compare my child to my ex-partner, even when the similarities are striking and painful to observe.
☐ I do not blame my children’s anxieties, fears, and problems at this difficult time on the absent parent either to the child or the absent parent.
☐ I am trying to help my children not to feel shame about the separation or divorce.
☐ I understand that separation or divorce does not make me a failure.
☐ I have let my children’s teachers know about the change in my family’s structure so they can help the children.
☐ I am not making too many changes in my children’s life at once.
☐ I am allocating family chores so that they get done despite the absence of the other parent.
☐ I am encouraging my children to resume their normal activities.
☐ I acknowledge my children’s deep-seated wish for a reunited family without offering false hopes or angry denials.
☐ I am trying to maintain as much emotional control as I can so my children will not feel obligated to take on adult roles that are beyond them.
☐ I am not turning my child into my adult confidante.

Adapted from http://www.ag.gov.bc.ca/family-justice/resources/brochures_booklets/pas/Checklist2.htm
Goals and Expectations

What would you like to achieve by the end of this program? Write down five goals in order of priority (number 1 being the most important):

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

5. 

How much do I expect that this Program will help me achieve some of the above goals?

1  2  3  4  5  
strongly disagree unsure agree strongly disagree

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Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names

Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan of action:
Session 2

The Impact of Separation on Me
Before commencing this session make sure you read through and are familiar with the concepts in the exercise “What is Separation Adjustment”

Session 2 Agenda

1. Introduction to this Week’s Topic and Reiteration of Guidelines
2. Homework Review
3. What is Separation Adjustment and How Are You Adjusting?
4. Social support
5. Relaxation
6. Homework
7. Conclusion

1. Introduce This Week’s Topic and Reiteration of Guidelines

Introduce this week’s topic, ie. *The Impact of Separation on Me*.

Revise the group guidelines discussed in the previous week.

2. Homework Review

Ask participants to discuss some of their goals for the course as identified on the *Goals and Expectations* worksheet. Collect these worksheets from the participants. Let them know that you will photocopy them during the break (for reference at the completion of the program) and return them at the end of the session. Invite discussion regarding areas of strength and areas requiring some work that participants identified using the *Help for Children of Any Age* handout.
3. What is Separation Adjustment and How Are You Adjusting?

Discuss with participants that adjusting to a relationship separation is a process. Discuss the specific challenges associated with separation such as attachment to their former partner and their ability to rebuild their life as a single person (e.g., feelings of loneliness, emotional rollercoaster). Also discuss the challenges of negotiating with the former partner and managing relationships with children.

Discuss how a relationship separation is a stressor but it is different to experiencing other types of stressors. Ask participants how adjusting to a separation is different to adjusting to, say, losing a job or having a car accident or grieving over the loss of someone. (You may, however, want to walk them through the grief cycle because some people relate to it well – but be sure to let them know that grief is only a part of separation adjustment). Discuss similarities and differences with the grief process. You want the participants to understand that, although adjusting to relationship separation shares similarities with adjusting to other life stressors, it also is unique and different from any other life stressor.

Walk them through the following graph (to be presented as an overhead slide) which shows that after a separation people do adjust over time in regards to attachment to the former partner and loneliness and negative emotions (although often people will continue to feel lonely even after they have disconnected from their former partner – let them know this is normal). So people improve on the different challenges at different times.

However, emphasise to them that research shows that generally over time parenting conflict does not improve over time. So if you can’t communicate with your former partner in regards to the children 1 week after the separation then chances are that you will be unable to communicate with them 2 years after the separation. This is also the case in relation to the relationship between parents and children after separation.
Let them know, however, that it is all not doom and gloom and that research shows us that you can learn new ways of interacting with your former partner and children. You can change the line to go on a downward trajectory, in other words people can improve on their parenting adjustment. And this is what this course is aimed to do – to help that line go downwards (illustrate using the overhead. However tonight we are just going to focus on you rather than parenting adjustment – that will be the remainder of the course).

Below are some examples of what each of the adjustment domains mean:

- **Attachment to former partner** - While some separated individuals might feel relief at leaving a severely distressed relationship, many separated individuals report an emotional attachment to the former partner, which manifests as a continuing longing for emotional closeness with that person. Let the participants know that excessive attachment can be seen as both positive and negative. E.g., one person might continually pine for them, while someone else may denigrate their former partner at any opportunity. Both these cases demonstrate high attachment.

- **Loneliness and negative emotions** – this involves adjusting to the loss of social networks associated with the former partner. Coupled with and the loss of the partner, severe loneliness can occur. Loneliness after separation is associated with spending increased time alone, feeling isolated, and experiencing periods of low mood or sadness – the emotional roller coaster effect.

- **Co-parenting conflict** – Can the person co-ordinate parenting of their children with a former partner? Approximately 50% of separating couples in Australia and the United States have dependant children. Effective co-parenting after separation is important to both adult and child wellbeing. Co-parenting includes negotiating key decisions regarding the children, such as choice of schooling, and child contact arrangements and day to day decisions. Substantial proportions of separated adults report long-term difficulties in such negotiations.

- **Parent-child relationship** – Often parents do not spend as much time with their children post separation and they may be unaware of how their children are coping. They can
become distant from their children. In addition the time spent with children is generally less quality time. Parents often discipline less effectively after a separation as well.

Let them know that if they think they are having attachment or lonely negativity problems to obtain referrals from you – because that may interfere with their ability to get the most out of the course.

**Handout**: Have participants consider how they have been coping on each of the domains. As a group discuss what areas they would like to work on and brainstorm how they could do this?

**Question**: Ask how do they think their adjustment affects their children?
OHP
Adjustment Changes Over Time

Adjustment Problems

- dashed line: attachment
- dotted line: lonely negativity
- solid line: parenting conflict
- dashed-dotted line: parent-child relationship

Time after Separation

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35

1 wk 3-mths 6-mths 12-mths 18-mths 24-mths
Plot your own separation adjustment

Draw lines (as per the grid) showing how you have been travelling in regards to your separation adjustment. Decide what time 1, time 2, time 3 and time 4 relate to. For example time 1 might be when you moved out of the house, time 2 might be 3 months after separation, time 3 might be 6 months after separation and time 4 might be currently. Then draw 4 lines with each line representing a domain of separation adjustment as shown in the box.

What area/s do you think you need to work on to improve?

What might you need to do?
4. Social Support

Social support is very important in helping individuals cope with the many changes of relationship separation.

Activity Write up on the board what changes participants are working through. Try to elicit the following:

- changing homes, neighbours, and schools
- economic changes
- changes in employment routines – reducing work or taking on more work
- more childcare responsibilities
- Seeing the children less

Getting personal support after separation is very important, particularly given all the adjustments, changes and challenges that must be faced. Let participants know that support comes in many forms.

Activity Write these 3 key forms of support on the board and their definitions:

**Resource support** → help with things like moving house, looking after children etc

**Emotional support** → someone to talk to, give you a hug, confidantes

**Financial support** → money and the like

Have participants consider who they get support from. Many people will nominate, family members, friends, church leaders, work mates, counsellors, mediators, lawyers. Have them fill out the *Getting Support* handout.
During this exercise be conscious of people nominating their children for emotional support. Tell them not to confide in their children. Make sure you have lots of support outside. Coming to this course is a great way to ensure you do not burden your children.
Getting Support

Think about support you may need.

On a scale of 1–10 put a circle around each scale to show how important each support is to you at the moment.

**Resource support** (people to help you out e.g., moving house, look after children, clean house)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I I I I I I I I I I
not that important moderately important very important

Who gives me this support?

**Emotional support** (someone to talk to, give a hug, confidantes)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I I I I I I I I I I
not that important moderately important very important

Who gives me this support?

**Financial support** – money and the like

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I I I I I I I I I I
not that important moderately important very important

Who gives me this support?
5. Relaxation

Introduce the concept of relaxation: ‘The last part of this session will be spent talking about the benefits of relaxation. You will find that the more relaxed you are the more able you are to execute all the skills you learn in this program. For example, when we look at different parenting techniques it is important you remain calm and relaxed when employing these skills. Also we shall be looking at controlling anger and relaxation is one technique of anger management. Therefore relaxation is integral to this program and is what you could call a prerequisite to learning other skills.’

Ask the group, ‘How do you know when you need to relax?’ (Write responses on board under 3 headings: Physiological Response, Emotional Response, Cognitive Response)

Examples:

- **Physiological Response**: heart beats fast, mouth goes dry, feel hot and sweaty, muscles tense, shaky
- **Emotional Response**: feeling angry, upset
- **Cognitive Response**: negative thoughts (eg. I can’t take this any longer, I want to punch his lights out).

Ask the group, ‘What are some of the ways you relax now?’ Write responses on the board.

Inform participants that relaxation can be considered a skill. The more you practise relaxation the more you will benefit.

Tell participants that “I am going to guide you through a relaxation exercise”. You may suggest that participants turn their chairs to face outward from the circle as some may feel self-conscious practising this exercise. Read the following script by physiologist Edmund Jacobson (this will take approximately 12-15 minutes to complete):
PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION is a stress management approach that enables persons to relearn the natural sensation of deep relaxation. Chronic stress and/or trauma can leave an individual with high levels of muscle tension. By paying close attention to the sensation as one tightens and relaxes a muscle a person can release the muscle tension and learn to quiet the body at will.

General Instructions: Tense each muscle group in sequence taking care to avoid any strain. Pay attention to the sensation, hold the position five seconds, then relax again, noting the feeling, allowing the muscles to go absolutely limp. Take at least twelve minutes to complete these eighteen muscle groups, any faster is at too quick a pace.

1. Clench both fists – note tension in hand and forearm – relax.
2. Touch shoulders with fingers, raise arms – note tension in biceps and upper arms – relax.
3. Shrug shoulders, raise as high as possible, note tension in shoulders – relax.
5. Close eyes tightly – study tension – relax with eyes lightly closed.
10. Arch your back, move away from back of chair, push arms backward – note tension in back and shoulders – relax.
11. Take a deep breath and hold it – note tension in chest and back – relax.
12. Take two deep breathes of air, hold, and exhale – note your breathing becoming slower and more relaxed – relax.
13. Suck in stomach, try to make it reach your spine – note feeling of tension in stomach – relax, noting your breathing becoming more regular.
15. Tense buttocks by raising self up on them – note tension.
17. Point toes upward toward face – note tension in feet and calves of legs – relax.
18. Curl toes downward as if burying them in the sand – note tension in arches of the feet – relax.

At the end of the exercise ask “How does everyone feel?” Point out that it will be pretty hard to get upset with your kids and former partner when you feel like this!
Let participants know that they can obtain guided relaxation recordings online (eg. www.allaboutdepression.com/relax) and from bookshops and local libraries etc.

6. Homework

Give handout *War Zone Experiences* and the *Rapid Relaxation* handout. Ask them to complete these and bring to the session next week.

7. Conclusion

Recap what you have covered this evening, ie. discussing the different domains of separation adjustment, how you are going in each domain, how you get support and an exercise to help you relax.

Let participants know that the remainder of the course is about the kids and next week will be focused on learning how to interact with the former partner in a way that is beneficial to the kids.
**War zone experiences**

Think back over the last couple of months. Circle those experiences that have happened during this time.

1. You argued with your ex on the phone when your child was in the room or would be able to hear you.
2. Your ex asked your child questions about your private life
3. You asked your child about your ex’s private life
4. You and your ex argued or yelled at each other in your child’s presence
5. You told your child you don’t like them spending time with their other parent.
6. Your ex said bad things about you to your child.
7. You said bad things about your ex to your child.
8. Your ex asked your child about your new partner.
9. You asked your child about your ex’s new partner.
10. Your ex told your child that he/she doesn’t like them spending time with you.
11. You and your ex hit each other or physically hurt each other in front of your child.
12. People in your neighbourhood said bad things to your child about you and/or your ex.
13. Your child’s relatives said bad things to them either about you or your ex.
14. You or your ex told your child the divorce was because of your child.
15. Your child heard one of your friends or one of your ex’s friends say bad things about either you or your ex.
16. You argued at change over

What are some additional war zones your child might fear?

17.
18.
19.
20.
RAPID RELAXATION

You by now should know what it feels like when you are in deep relaxation. The aim now is to reduce the time it takes to feel that sense of relaxation in everyday events including stressful or anger producing situations. This may be achieved through the following rapid relaxation exercise:

1. Close your eyes.
2. Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed.
3. Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word "Relax", silently to yourself. For example the sequence should go, breathe in...out, "Relax", in...out, "Relax", etc. Breathe easily and naturally.
4. Expect distracting thoughts. When these distracting thoughts occur gently bring yourself back to repeating the word "Relax".
5. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm clock. When you finish, sit quietly for several moments, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes open. Do not stand up for a few minutes.
6. Do not worry whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a quiet attitude and permit relaxation to occur, at its own pace. When distracting thoughts enter your mind, try to ignore them by not dwelling upon them and return to repeating "Relax". With practice, the response should come with little effort.

To benefit from rapid relaxation you must practise it. It is a skill, so remember the more you practise it, the more effective you will become at doing this. You should aim to practise rapid relaxation at least twice a day, particularly when you are about to encounter a stressful situation or are in a situation where you feel yourself becoming angry.

Rapid relaxation works best when you also practise the longer version of relaxation using a guided relaxation recording. So remember to practise them both. When do you think Rapid Relaxation would be most useful?
Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names          Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action:
Session 3

Managing My Relationship with My Former Partner

Part 1: Parenting Styles, Conflict, Anger Management, Assertion and Problem-Solving
Session 3 Agenda

1. Review homework
2. Different Parenting Relationships Post Separation and Impact of Parenting Relationships on Children
3. Reducing the Conflict
4. Anger Management and Assertion
5. Problem-Solving
6. Homework
7. Conclusion

1. Review Homework

Ask participants how their rapid relaxation went? When did they use it? Was it useful?

How did people go with the War Zone handout? Did it identify areas for people that they would like to work on?

2. Different Parenting Relationships Post Separation and Impact of Parenting Relationships on Children

Give participants the Parenting Styles After Separation handout descriptions of the different types of post separation parenting relationship styles and have participants work out which best describes their relationship with their former partner

- Cooperative
- Parallel
- Conflictual
Parenting Styles After Separation

1. **Cooperative Parenting:** Parents who adopt this parenting strategy look after their children cooperatively. They talk to each other, plan and make decisions regarding their children together. These parents work out living arrangements that work for everyone. Conflict is generally very low. These parents are also able to attend functions together without feeling overly uncomfortable.

2. **Parallel Parenting:** These parents find it more difficult to cooperate, but agree to parent their children responsibly in their own ways. These parents don’t talk a lot to each other. However they do communicate and make decisions in ways that do not cause distress to their children. For example, these parents may structure a weekly phone call to discuss their children’s needs or text regularly. They may organise change-over arrangements so they do not come face to face with each other. Children of these parents will generally understand that each parent has their own rules in each household and can adapt quite well to this.

3. **Conflictual Parenting:** These parents remain in long-term conflict with each other. Some parents never seem to be able to move beyond the conflict and remain locked in bitter, sad and destructive communication patterns. These parents argue, yell and may be purposefully spiteful towards the other parent. Children of these parents cope very poorly.

What parenting style are you?
What parenting style realistically would you like to be?
What needs to happen to achieve that?
General discussion points to consider: Re-visit with participants the importance of reducing their conflict. Discuss the impact on children who witness their parents’ ongoing conflict, (eg. Children feel very reassured when they witness their parents talking about taking care of them. What do you think children would experience if they continually see their parents arguing? How might this affect their development emotionally? What might it be like for your children if conflict was reduced?)

Discuss the need to distinguish between (1) the role of your children’s other parent, and (2) your ex!

3. Reducing the Conflict

Give out the Reduce the Conflict handout

Ask Participants:

- How do your children respond to being caught in the war zone?
- What gets in the way of you communicating with your ex? What can you do about it?
- Identify when you are most likely to have conflict

4. Anger Management and Assertion

Give out the Anger Management and Assertive Behaviour handouts.

Anger Management: Introduce the idea of coping self-statements, which are used as a form of anger management and will help participants to reduce the conflict with their former partner.
**Assertion:** Introduce the idea of talking with the former partner using assertive statements. Go through “I-Statements” and develop assertive statements using a combination of behaviour, feelings and effect.

Ask participants to write down an assertive statement as per the *Assertive Behaviour* worksheet.

Remind participants about the need to be assertive with people other than your ex in relation to the separation! For example, family members may put down your ex to your children. An appropriate assertive response using an I-Statement to them might be something like:

“I know you are trying to be on my side and support me, but when my daughter hears you say bad things about her dad, she feels really bad. So please for her sake stop saying these things when she is around”.
Reduce the Conflict

*By controlling the anger of a minute, you may avoid the remorse of a lifetime* (Chinese Proverb)

- Treat your relationship like a business arrangement. You both are the managers of your children.
- Have a clear head before you go into a meeting with your ex. Say to yourself that no matter what you will not get upset.
- Set aside a special time each week for a parenting meeting, e.g., a phone call one night when the children go to bed.
- Be prepared to be flexible!
- Do not name call or put down the other parent
- Treat the other parent how you would like to be treated
- Accept the other parent makes choices
- Think about: How do I want my children to see me? What type of model am I to my children?
- Find new ways to talk to the other parent
- At the very least be respectful at change over periods – be polite, say hello
- Remember to stick to the issues about the kids
- Attack the problem not the person
- Use a communication book
- Use a third party
- Use text messages

Final tips! When you are upset, try to avoid:

- Seeing your children as your possessions - they are not, they are people
- Saying things you don't mean and might regret later
- Saying unkind things about the other parent
- Making your children afraid that they might never see the other parent again
- Allowing your children to become caught up in the adults' arguments
Anger Management

Coping Self-Statements

If you anticipate becoming angry or you already know of situations that make you angry or stressed, developing coping self-statements can help you prepare for the situation and help you to remain calm in the situation.

You may like to write your statements down and read them just before you enter the stressful situation.

Examples of Coping Self Statements:

“Before I pick up the children, I’ll sit in the car and briefly relax using a few deep breaths”
“I’ll just roll with the punches and not get bent out of shape”
“My child is here and it is not good to argue in front of him”
“I will be able to handle this as long as I stay relaxed and calm”

Develop a list of self-coping statements that you can use next time you are in a situation that is likely to make you angry. Think of the situation first, then think about the types of coping self-statements you may use.
**Assertive Behaviour**

“Assert: to state or affirm positively, assuredly, plainly, or strongly” (Webster Dictionary)

Assertion is not always about getting your own way. It is about understanding your rights and knowing when and how to assert those rights. It is also about respecting others. If you apply assertion after weighing up the pros and cons for a given situation, people will respect you. Remember, though; suddenly using assertion will not automatically mean you will get what you want. Assertion does not rely on name calling or put downs.

Use *"I" statements* to describe how you feel and express your request clearly and respectfully. By using the "I" statement you are not attributing blame. For eg., "I feel sad that the children have to start their time seeing me after we have just argued and I think we should both make an effort to change".

Think of the following 3 when making an assertive statement:

1. **Behaviour** – ‘When we fight at changeover…..
2. **Feelings** – I feel really upset……
3. **Effect** – and I know the children end up feeling just terrible’.

Write down an issue that is bothering you, then devise an assertive response using ‘I’ statements and incorporating behaviour, feelings and effect…
5. Problem-Solving

Introduce the concept of problem-solving to participants: “Problem solving is another useful technique in preventing the escalation of conflict. Adopting a problem-solving approach to parenting and separation issues with your former partner addresses the needs and wants of both parents in finding solutions, and so promotes a sense of teamwork, cooperation, communication and understanding with your former partner. Taking this approach when you can’t agree makes it less likely that conflict will occur and escalate. The problem-solving steps are also useful in coming up with solutions to your own individual problems as they come up.”

Outline the 6 problem-solving steps for participants as follows:

1) **Identify and define the problem**: This involves a discussion of each parent’s point of view, their feelings and needs.

2) **Brainstorm possible solutions**: The idea is to think of as many ideas as possible in a short amount of time, but refrain from judging the ideas at this point.

3) **Evaluate proposed solutions**: The ideas are evaluated by generating pros and cons of each problem-solving option.

4) **Decide on a solution**: A solution is chosen that is mutually acceptable and meets as many needs as possible.

5) **Develop a plan of action and carry it out**: The specific details of the plan must be outlined clearly (ie. How, when, who, where, what etc) and must be practical. The plan is then implemented.

6) **Assess the solution**: A date is set to evaluate the outcome of the solution to determine if it is successful. If

Provide participants with the *Problem Solving* worksheet and invite them to problem-solve an issue pertinent to them following the 6 steps.
Problem Solving

1. Define the problem
   - In defining the problem, clarify the needs and concerns of both parties (i.e. what is the problem from the perspective of both individuals?)

2. Brainstorm options to solve the problem
   - Try to come up with as many options and ideas as possible (as ‘crazy’ as they may seem!)
   - Don’t judge the options yet

3. Evaluate the pros and cons of each option
   - Allow time for reflection
   - Try to be as open-minded as possible

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<td>Problem-solving option 2</td>
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4. Decide on a solution
   - The solution should be mutually acceptable and should work for both parties
   - The solution should meet as many needs as possible
   - The solution may be the product of two or more options combined

5. Develop a plan of action
   - The plan should expressly outline the steps involved in taking action to solve the problem (i.e. How? Who? When? Where? What?)
   - Is the plan practical?

6. Assess the solution
   - Make a date to evaluate the solution
   - How will you know whether your plan of action is working? (i.e. what are the indicators of success?)
   - If the plan is not working, it may indicate that some needs have been overlooked, or that a better plan has been overlooked. Retrace the problem-solving steps to find a more workable solution
6. Homework

Give out the homework handout and ask participants to fill it in over the next week.

7. Conclusion

In this session we have discussed the different parenting styles, reducing conflict, anger management and assertion. Next week we are extending on this learning by discussing more about parenting coalitions, troubleshooting difficult situations and supporting your child’s relationship with your ex partner.
Strategies to Improve My Parenting Relationship with My Ex-Partner

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<th>What I did (strategy used)</th>
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<th>How successful was this strategy (from 1 to 10). Why?</th>
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Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names

Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action:
Session 4

Managing My Relationship with My Former Partner

Part 2: Parenting Coalitions, Troubleshooting, and Supporting My Child’s Relationship with the Other Parent
**Session 4 Agenda**

1. Review Homework
2. Building a Parenting Coalition
3. Troubleshooting Impediments to Collaborative Coparenting
4. Supporting my Child’s Relationship with the Other Parent
5. Homework
6. Conclusion

**1. Review Homework**

Check the responses to participants’ homework on improving their parenting relationship with their former partner. Ask questions specifically what they have noticed in relation to their use of self-coping statements, assertion, anger management, and the impact of these on their relationships with their former partners.

**2. Building a Collaborative Co-Parenting Relationship**

Give out the handout *Building a Collaborative Co-Parenting Arrangement* and work through it with participants.

**3. Troubleshooting Impediments to Collaborative Co-Parenting**

Introduce some common impediments to collaborative co-parenting. Use the *Common Impediments to Collaborative Co-Parenting* overhead provided to invite group discussion in relation to each of the impediments, and how they might affect the parenting relationship.

Provide participants with the *Fostering a Collaborative Co-Parenting Relationship* handout and discuss these tips as a group.
Building a Collaborative Co-Parenting Relationship

A collaborative co-parenting arrangement is a business-like arrangement between parents with the following advantages:

- Adults cooperate with each other rather than being defensive
- Children do not have to choose between parents
- Children do not have to worry about what they say or that what they say will not cause hostility between their parents
- Responsibility for raising children is shared
- Flexibility is possible
- Having both parents collaborate shows children that all is well and that their needs are continued to be looked after despite mum and dad not being together anymore.

How to foster a collaborative co-parenting arrangement:

- Make positive comments to the adults in the other household, e.g. ‘Thank you for picking up Mary from her dance class’
- Keep the other household informed about important events e.g., when a child is ill, parent-teacher interviews, school plays, sports days.
- Use a third party such as a mediator to help you agree on parenting arrangements that are difficult to negotiate.
- Other ways?..........................................................................................................................
Common Impediments to Collaborative Co-Parenting

What effect do the following have on the parenting relationship?

1. Passing messages through the children

2. Conflict at change-over time

3. Children’s ‘Hearsay’ (eg. ‘My kids said that…..’)

4. Difficulties communicating (conflict, name-calling etc)
Fostering a Collaborative Co-Parenting Relationship

1. Do not pass messages through your children

It is not your children’s responsibility to pass on parenting messages. They are children and you and your former partner are the parents and must do the parenting.

2. Minimise Problems at Changeover Time

What can you do to minimise problems at changeover? For eg., meet at a neutral place, do not have your new partner with you, pick up and drop off at school so you don’t have to see each other.

3. Manage Your Children’s ‘Hearsay’

**Question:** How would you react if your child said:

- ‘Dad said that I could spend more time at his house’
- ‘Mum said your new girlfriend is useless’
- ‘Mum said you don’t pay enough child support’

**Answer:** Problem solve how you might approach your former partner regarding your children’s ‘hearsay’:

- Use coping self-statements, eg. ‘I will keep my cool’
- Do not accuse or put blame onto your former partner
- Choose a time when your children are not around
- Say something like ‘I would like to talk to you about something that is concerning Michelle. I am not accusing you of anything but Michelle said that you said that she could go on school
camp. We need to talk because I previously had said that she could not go.’

4. Use a communication diary

Using a communication diary is an excellent tool when communication with your ex-partner is difficult or conflictual.

Communication diary rules:
- No name calling
- No put downs
- Be specific and clear
- Decide on what will be communicated through the diary, i.e. keep it focused on the kids

5. Arrange a business meeting – what rules might you need for this to occur?

What are the bottom lines, i.e. what really matters? Am I too anxious about my children? What will I not tolerate from my former partner? Why? Is it really worth making an issue over? What am I not prepared to negotiate?
4. Supporting my Child’s Relationship with the Other Parent

Research shows that children who have regular ongoing contact with both parents do the best! In this section it is important to elicit participant’s barriers to helping their children with their relationship with the other parent. Use gentle challenging and reflect the impact on children.

Ask participants about the child’s relationship with the other parent before the separation?

Did they allow the child to be alone with the parent prior to the separation?

** Be careful though because sometimes contact can be dangerous for the children **

Ask participants how they currently support their child’s relationship with the other parent? (regardless of what the quality of the relationship with the other parent is like). Write answers up on the board.

Give out the ‘Supporting My Child’s Relationship With The Other Parent’ and the ‘Are There Things I Do That Restrict Their Relationship?’ handouts to participants.

Depending on the group, you may like to elicit participants’ responses to this. But be prepared for some defensiveness.

5. Homework

Give out the Improving the Parenting Relationship and Supporting Your Children homework handout and ask participants to complete it for next week.
6. Conclusion

Summarise the topics covered in the last two weeks regarding managing relationships with the former partner, and flag that in the next two weeks we will focus on improving parenting skills as they relate to relationship separation.
Supporting My Child’s Relationship with Their Other Parent

When you have developed a parenting plan with your former partner sit down with your children and write up a schedule for your child to put up on their wall. You can either create one on the computer or buy a cheap calendar and put it in each house. See example below where a mother and her son created the following calendar on their home computer for the son to put in his bedroom at both Mum and Dad’s place. This is just an example for January but you could do this for every month. Include school holidays, birthdays, Mother’s and Father’s Days etc….. If you have a colour printer you can also use different colours for different contacts.

January

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Key:

**Bold large numbers** – staying overnight at Dad’s

**Underlined large numbers** – Dad taking me to soccer training and having dinner with Dad.

**Bold and Underlined large numbers** – Dad taking me to soccer training then having dinner with Dad and staying overnight at Dad’s.

**Bold, italics** – Dad’s birthday and staying overnight with Dad.
Are There Things That I Do That Restrict their Relationship?

Do I do any of the following...

- Restrict phone calls to the other parent when my child is with me?
- Find fault with my ex’s choice of activities to do with my child?
- Argue during changeover times?
- Be inflexible with changes to our current parenting systems?
- Forget to remind my child about my ex’s birthday or Mothers or Fathers Day?
- Subtly badmouth my ex in front of my children?
- Put other important things ahead of my child’s relationship with the other parent? For example; ‘She can’t have contact anymore on a Friday night because she will miss out on swimming training on Saturday morning. I will drop her off to you after swimming training has ended’.
- Not prepare adequately for contact?
Improving the Parenting Relationship and Supporting Your Children

1. Put in action a plan to support the relationship between your children and their other parent.
   a. What I plan to do:

   b. Outcome:

2. Put in action a plan to improve your parenting relationship with the other parent.
   a. What I plan to do:

   b. Outcome:

3. Any other things I found useful?
Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names          Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action:
Session 5

Parenting Skills

Part 1: Managing My Relationship with My Children

(Session materials adapted from the *New Beginnings Parenting Program* by Wolchik)
**Session 5 Agenda**

1. Review homework
2. Introducing this Week’s Topic
3. Family Fun Time
4. One-On-One Time
5. Catch Them Being Good
6. Listening, Thinking and Responding
7. Lightning Bolt Issues and Questions
8. Set Homework
9. Conclusion

**1. Introducing this Week’s Topic**

Introduce the topic, ie. ‘This week is about ways to improve your relationship with your children. Separation is a time when sometimes this relationship can be a little neglected because of the many stressors on children, on you and on your time. Next week we will talk about effective discipline strategies.’

**2. Review Homework**

Review last weeks homework in relation to supporting children’s relationship with the other parent and improving the co-parental relationship. Work through some of their emotions in relation to helping to support and nurture their child’s relationship with their former partner.

**3. Family Fun Time**

Explain the idea of family fun time, ie: ‘It is doing a fun family activity together. Doing this with your children will increase positive and warm contact with your children.’
Give out *Family fun Time* handout and go through it with participants, ie. ‘So when you get home talk to the children about this concept and together decide on when it will happen and what you will do’.
Family Fun Time

General Rules of Family Fun Time

- Is undertaken once per week
- Selected by the kids but something everyone can enjoy. Examples could include: a trip to McDonalds, riding a bike, a walk, making pizza, going to the park, playing a board game, playing in the pool, having a slumber party in the lounge. No television or X-box!!!
- The activity is planned ahead of time (preferably a week in advance)
- Does not require spending lots of money

What are some other examples of Family Fun Time (make sure to ask the kids)
3. One-On-One Time

This is powerful stuff!! This activity helps to increase your children’s self-esteem and meets some of their emotional needs, including feeling accepted. One-on-one time is REGULAR, SHORT times that parents spend with their children. It is a time where children can feel that everything they do is right and nothing they do is wrong. After separation parents are so busy that this time can get overlooked. But it is crucial at this time that children have exclusive time with their parents and receive attention and emotional support.

Give out One-on-One Time handout, and discuss what one-on-one time consists of and the general guidelines and introduce the idea of ‘tailgating’.

In order to demonstrate one-on-one time, one facilitator (acting as a parent) may watch the other facilitator (acting as the child) doing a drawing.

1. Ask the group: ‘How do you think it would feel for the child?’
   Obtain responses such as ‘special’, ‘important’....

2. Ask the group: ‘How do you think it would feel to be Mum/Dad?’

Some parents might feel awkward. Let them know it gets easier with time. Some parents might feel like they are spoiling their child or indulging them. Reinforce to them that it is really important that their child feels special and important at this time. Children can’t get enough of parents’ positive attention throughout parental separation.
One-on-One Time

One on one time is REGULAR, SHORT times that parents spend with their children.

It is a time where children can feel that everything they do is right and nothing they do is wrong.

After separation parents are so busy that this time can get overlooked. But it is crucial at this time that children have exclusive time with their parents and receive attention and emotional support.

Practise the skill of tailgating - verbally commenting on what your child is doing. Imagine that you are commentating a sporting event. Simply narrate, do not judge what your child is doing. This is a time to show positive acceptance. You may need to tailor this for older kids as they don’t particularly like you ‘tailgating them’, but they do appreciate you spending the time with them. With older kids it is usually just talking about what matters to them.

There are several parts to One-on-One Time

- Announce it – before beginning let your child know that you are now having One-on-One Time
- Child selects a 10 to 15 minute activity
- Throughout the activity provide positive attention, physical attention, listen and tailgate!!!
- Conclude by telling your child how much you enjoyed spending time with them.

What are some short, regular activities you can do with each of your children
Trouble-shooting One-on-One Time

Ask participants ‘what might get in the way of one-on-one time?’ and provide the following solutions to typical one-on-one time problems:

- If a child misbehaves during one-on-one time do what you normally would do after this type of behaviour and reschedule one-on-one time for the next day or so. (Ideas on discipline will begin next week).

- If your other children try to interrupt one-on-one time let them know you will spend one-on-one time with them at a specified time. Try and do one on one time when your other children are occupied. Be fair with one-on-one time and make sure you give each child the same amount of time.

- If your child does not want to do it tell them that this is really important for you to stay connected with them. Let them know it is easy for families to drift apart when there are so many changes. “I just really want to spend some time with you. Will you give it a try?”

- If your child does not want one on one time to end, empathise with them that you understand that it is difficult to stop when you are having a good time. Let your child know when the next one-on-one time is so they can look forward to it.

- If some participants talk about lack of time let them know that this is a common concern but ask them what is more important than the emotional development of their child. Some people talk about not worrying about their houses being so clean. If necessary shorten the one-on-one time to 5 to 10 minutes.

Remember this is a time NOT to direct your child or teach them anything!!
4. Catch Them Being Good

Introduce the Catch Them Being Good concept, and explain it to the group using the *Catch Them Being Good* handout below as a prompt. This strategy is useful for a number of reasons (as explained in the handout) and often prevents an escalation trap occurring. Discuss escalation traps with the group and how you can stop them as follows...

**The Escalation Trap:** Ask participants if they have had the experience that regardless of how much you yell, your children just don’t seem to listen and will often get naughtier! Inform them that this is the escalation trap. The louder you get the naughtier they get. Children will learn that to get attention they just need to muck up!

This skill will help your child build their self-esteem and also enhance the chance of your child continuing with their good behaviour.

*Give out Catch Them Being Good* handout.
Catch Them Being Good

Catching your children being good is the flip side to looking for trouble. Catch them being good is about ignoring the bad behaviour and just focusing on the good behaviour. The idea is that your children will learn that they get rewarded for good behaviour but no such reward for bad behaviour.

You need to pay attention to the behaviour rather than the child. Be specific. Instead of saying, ‘you are a good boy’, say ‘you are so helpful when you put your clothes in the basket’. Give them a smile, a hug, a gesture.

Always look for opportunities to catch them being good. Be a detective and notice lots of things – big and small!!

Pay attention to what was done rather than what was not done. For example thank your child for doing the washing up, even though they did not put the dishes away. So rather than getting upset for the child not putting the dishes away, you praise the child for what they did do. A hint here is not to use the word ‘but’ in your ‘catch them being good’ summary. When it comes around to the next time it is their turn to do the washing up and drying up, then is the time to request that their job tonight is to do both the washing up and the drying up.

Catching them being good will become a natural way that you relate to your child. This is much more pleasant than looking for the negatives!!!!!
5. Listening, Thinking and Responding

Introduce the topic as follows: “Children really want to talk to their parents. Children really want their parents to listen to them. Listening is not about giving advice or fixing things. It is important to get out of that habit. Communicating effectively with your children will allow you to feel closer to them and will help your children figure for themselves what to do. This will give them confidence and mastery. Consider the following when communicating with your children:

1. Listen
2. Think
3. Respond

We are going to look at each of these 3 skills separately”

Give participants the Engaging with Your Kids handout. Go through each of the 5 listening skills (Big Ears, Good Body Language, Good Openers, Mmm-hmms and Say Mores) with the group using the Listening, Thinking & Responding overhead and complete the below activities:

**Attentive Body Language Role Play:** Ask one of the parents to role play that they are a child trying to tell you about the good grades they obtained in Maths and you demonstrate poor listening through poor body language. And then demonstrate good body language. On the board put a line down the middle and on one side note participants’ examples of good body language and on the other note their examples of bad body language. Tell the group that the good side communicates ‘I am here for you’ while the bad side communicates ‘go away’.

**Good Openers Activity:** Turn these ‘closed’ questions into ‘open’ questions... ‘Did you like school today?’, ‘Did you win the game?’, ‘Did you pass your exam?’.
**Putting it all together**: Get into pairs. One member will talk about their previous weekend while the other member practises their listening, thinking and responding skills. Keep the overhead slide up while the participants practise. Remember to reinforce the participants’ efforts. Ask them, ‘How do you think your child will feel if you do this?’

Give a copy of the *Listening, Thinking & Responding* handout to the participants for their own reference.
Engaging with Your Kids

Listen

1. Big Ears – An attitude that you want to hear what your child is saying
2. Attentive Body Language – often speaks louder than words
3. Good Openers – Ask open ended questions e.g., ‘what’ or ‘how’ questions
4. Mmmm-Hmmms – lets the child know you are listening
5. Say Mores – encourages the child to continue their conversation

Think

Am I using (or able to use) the 5 listening skills?
Do I need to provide some minimal guiding?

Respond

Summary responses (both content and feelings) e.g., ‘Let’s see if I have got this right.....?’
Listening

How do we let our children know we are listening, ie. that we are interested in what they are saying and how to keep them talking. There are 5 things you can do to show you are listening:

1. **Have Big Ears.** This is extremely important! Have you heard the saying ‘I’m all ears’. This is what we want your children to feel. We want them to feel you are focused only on what they are saying.

1. **Attentive Body Language.** Body language is very important. Much of what you say is done non-verbally!

2. **Good Openers.** This skill will help to get the conversation started. ‘Open’ questions require some talking to answer them while ‘closed’ questions can be answered in one word, generally yes or no. A ‘closed question’ would be, ‘Did you have a good time at the party?’ An open question would be ‘What did you do at the party?’

2. **Mmmm-Hmmmms.** Doing lots of this will encourage your children to continue talking.

5. **Say-mores.** This also conveys to your child that you are listening. Examples of these include, ‘Gee, that’s really interesting, tell me more about that’, ‘Oh I see, what happened there’.
### Listening, Thinking & Responding

Ask your child the questions below to help you practise listening. You can even tell your child that this is your homework if they are resistant. For each question practise the 5 listening skills in your response. Try to listen and encourage your child to talk for as long as they want on the question you choose. It doesn’t matter if you or your child stray off track a little. Just use your skills and let them discuss what they want.

1. Who is your best friend?
2. What famous person do you like the most and why?
3. What embarrasses you the most?
4. What is your biggest fear?
5. What is your favourite kind of music?
6. Of all the things you have done what are you most proud of?
7. What is your biggest complaint about our family?
8. What sport do you enjoy most?
9. What really makes you angry?
10. What is your favourite family activity?
11. How do you think the other children at school feel about you?
12. What would you like to be when you grow up?
13. What are the foods you like and dislike the most?
14. What is your most prized possession?

What are some other topics...?

Remember good listening isn’t easy and requires time and patience and practise!

Remember that you don’t feel that you have to listen whenever your child requests it. You may be busy or it might be inconvenient for you. When this occurs, smile at your child and give them your attention while saying, ’I am really interested to hear what you say, but I am doing ........ now.’ How
about we have some one-on-one time in ..........(e.g., 1 hour) and you can tell me all about it then’. Maybe even end the statement with some physical contact. A quick kiss or a touch on the head etc.

Thinking

How often do we reply to our children without really thinking about what their request is or what we are saying?

We want to teach you to think before responding – consciously thinking – stopping and thinking! This will allow you time to tailor your responses to your children’s needs. Stopping and thinking will stop you going into automatic pilot mode and replying with a ‘quick fix’. It will take some practise because we are not used to doing it!

What generally happens when you rush into a response? (miss important info, feel frustrated, children feel frustrated, give advice when not needed).

When you are thinking, think - Can you use the 5 listening skills or does your child need some guiding?

Responding

When you respond start by summarising what your child has said or summarise how they are feeling! This can be a bit tricky, particularly the ‘feelings’ part. After the child has finished telling you their story briefly summarise what they have said. If there is an emotion attached to it, summarise that, e.g., ‘hmmm, lets see if I got this right, you went over to your Mum’s place and you said that you had a fight with her and that seems to have made you feel upset’. You can use the Feelings Vocabulary chart to help your child identify how they are feeling.
Minimal guidance – sometimes children will ask you what to do. In this instance guide them to developing their own responses. Maybe say back to them, ‘what do you think you could do’, or ‘have you thought about doing .....’

Always finish the conversation with ‘I really appreciate you being able to talk to me like this’.
**Feelings Vocabulary Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Angry</th>
<th>Loving</th>
<th>Sad</th>
<th>Happy</th>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Capable</th>
<th>Afraid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disgusted</td>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Ashamed</td>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>Chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Disappointed</td>
<td>Great</td>
<td>Helpless</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Frightened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furious</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Good</td>
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<td>Smart</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Generous</td>
<td>Hurt</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
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<td>Scared</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Likable</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Terrific</td>
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<td>Patient</td>
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<td>Special</td>
<td></td>
<td>Upset</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are some other feelings that might be relevant to your children
Tips for Putting New Parenting Skills into Practice: ‘When you find yourself not using your new parenting skills that will become a part of your permanent parenting style, think, what made it hard to use my skills e.g., ‘I got really angry’, ‘my child is particularly naughty’, ‘I am feeling really tired or busy’. Then ask yourself, ‘What problem must I solve?’ For e.g., I need to understand why my child is being naughty by using listen, think, respond or one-on-one time, or maybe I need to have a sleep and communicate this to my child e.g., ‘Mummy is feeling really tired and not very patient, I am sorry for this. I will have a little sleep and then I will feel better and will be able to spend some one-on-one time with you.’

6. Lightning Bolt Issues and Questions

In discussing listening, thinking and responding, parents generally express concern in relation to their children bringing up sensitive topics with them which parents may be afraid to discuss. These topics are referred to as lightning bolt issues or questions.

Discuss the below examples of common Lightning Bolt Questions (which might be the same for the participants). If time permits brainstorm how they might be dealt with – otherwise have participants do this for homework.

- Reasons for Parental Separation

It is important to be age appropriate. A lot of parents talk about how they always tell the truth and their children deserve to know the truth. This is not always best for children. We recommend that children be told four messages about the divorce:

1. A simple statement that the marriage didn’t work, eg. ‘We tried very hard but we couldn’t make our marriage work’.
2. A message that you still love your child, eg. ‘I don’t love your Mum anymore, but I love you as much as always and I will always love you. Children don’t get divorced. You still belong to both of us’.

2. Reassurance that the divorce wasn’t the child’s fault, eg. ‘Nothing you have done or could’ve done affected our decision’.

3. Reassurance about the future, eg. ‘I’m never going to leave you or stop loving you. I’ll always be there for you’.

Parents may need to repeat their responses to lightning bolt questions over and over again (possibly every week). Unlike adults, children don’t necessarily understand or integrate the message the first time it is communicated.

- **New Partners**

Most children’s fears about new partners are related to feelings that they might lose the parent’s love or have to compete for attention. It is important to listen, think, and respond to children at this time. Provide reassurance and be in relation to how they might be feeling.

Give out *Lightning Bolt Questions* handout, which summarise this information for participants’ own reference.
**Lightning Bolt Questions**

Lightning bolt questions refer to children asking their parents about issues which parents are afraid to discuss with them. Below are some examples of lightning bolt questions and examples of responding. If your child asks you a lightning bolt question and you need to think and respond, let them know this and that you will answer their question in (give specific time).

- **Reasons for the Parental Separation**

Be age appropriate. A lot of parents talk about how they always tell the truth and their children deserve to know the truth. This is not always best for your children. And it is not fair to impose your sense of morality if it means you are actually going to hurt your children. We recommend that children be told four messages about the divorce:

1. A simple statement that the marriage didn’t work – ‘We tried very hard but we couldn’t make our marriage work’.
2. A message that you still love your child – ‘I don’t love your Mum anymore, but I love you as much as always and I will always love you. Children don’t get divorced. You still belong to both of us’.
3. Reassurance that the divorce wasn’t the child’s fault – ‘Nothing you have done or could’ve done affected our decision’.
4. Reassurance about the future – ‘I’m never going to leave you or stop loving you. I’ll always be there for you’.

- **New Partners**

Most children’s fears about new partners are related to feelings that they might lose the parent’s love or have to compete for attention. It is important to listen, think, and respond to children at this time! Summarise their concerns both content and feeling.

NB: You might need to repeat your responses to lightning bolt questions over and over again (possibly every week). Unlike adults, children don’t necessarily understand or integrate the message if it is communicated only once.
Family Fun Time:
What did you do?
Who was there?

Catch Them Being Good:
What behaviours did you ‘catch’?
How did your child respond when you ‘caught them’?

One-on-one time:
What did you do and how did it go?

How did your children respond to the 5 listening skills (Big ears, body language, good openers, mmm-hmms, say mores). Were any of the 5 harder to do than the others?

My lightning bolt issues are:

During the next few days, watch your child’s behaviours carefully.
What are some of the good things your child does that you want to see more of?

What are some things your child does that drive you crazy and you’d like to see less of? List in order of how crazy they make you feel!
7. Homework

Give out the homework handout and ask participants to complete it for next week. Let them know there is quite a bit of homework this week to do, but encourage them to keep up the good work in trying to improve their parenting skills as they are likely to see benefits with practise and persistence. Advise the group that any difficulties or issues that come up in attempting to practise their new skills can be troubleshooting in the next session.

8. Conclusion

Remind the participants that this week we have looked at ways of becoming closer to our children and improving the parent-child relationship. Next week we will look at discipline strategies.
Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names                      Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action:
Session 6

Parenting Skills

Part 2 : Love and Discipline.

(Session materials adapted from the New Beginnings Parenting Program by Wolchik)
Session 6 Agenda

1. Review homework
2. Introducing Discipline and Parenting Styles
3. Developing a Discipline Plan
4. Homework
5. Conclusion

1. Review Homework

Ask each participant to give an example of something they found easy and something they found difficult for homework? Alternatively, ask them something that worked well and something that worked not so well for them? Problem solve any difficulties with them.

Review the child behaviours that parents want to increase and decrease. Tell them that the skills they learn today will help them achieve this.

2. Introducing Discipline and Parenting Styles

Discuss the following with participants:

Discipline is about teaching, not punishment!

Discipline presents a big challenge for single parents. Ask the participants why this might be? (example responses: only one parent rather than two, divorce causes lots of stress which impacts negatively on parents and children, children do tend to behave more poorly given the stressors, less time to supervise).
So after separation parents have less help with discipline and more complex discipline problems. Parents often expect higher standards from their children and to take on more responsibility. This all sounds a little contradictory!

Give out the *Identifying Your Own Parenting Style* handout, and discuss the different parenting styles with the group.

Ask participants to work out their own parenting style and those of their former partner.
Identifying Your Own Parenting Style

- **Authoritarian** – This is the parent who lays down the law. There is little consultation with the child or explanation given about the rules. These parents are a little like drill sergeants. “These are the rules and you will follow them because I told you to. Do it now”. Often there is a lot of yelling and the children will often yell back and/or parent and child will get into an escalation trap and/or children will become anxious and withdrawn.

- **Permissive** – This is the parent who is tolerant of anything and everything that their children do (including misbehaviour and aggression). There are few rules and few consequences if the rules are broken. The children often are allowed to run free with little in the way of boundaries. These parents can often feel resentful or overwhelmed when their children behave badly and are unaware of how to effect change.

- **Democratic** – This is the parent who is fair and uses reasonable, enforceable ways to control their children. This parent sets realistic rules and goals and clearly communicates this to the children. Discipline is used consistently and fairly and this parent, most importantly, responds to children’s good behaviour.
Tell participants: ‘Your discipline has a big effect on the nature and quality of the relationship you have with your children. We want to try and increase your democratic parenting practices.’

**Why do children misbehave?**

Children misbehave not because they are bad or punishing parents for the separation. Ask participants why they think their children misbehave. Try and elicit the following responses, and write them on the board:

Children misbehave because:

- They are not getting enough positive attention (tackle this by using one-on-one time, catch them being good)
- They may be angry and expressing their feelings by ‘acting out’. They may do this because they are unsure how to express themselves appropriately and are unsure how else to make themselves heard (tackle this by using listen – 5 listening skills, think, respond).
- They are not clear about what the rules or expectations are and will ‘test the limits’
- They may think they can get away with it!

### 3. Developing a Discipline Plan

Give out *Developing a Discipline Plan* handout. Tell participants we are going to cover these (particularly the first 2) in some detail.
Developing a Discipline Plan

1. Adopt clear and realistic expectations for behaviours you want to increase or decrease.

2. Develop a plan which includes reasonable and enforceable consequences. Clearly communicate expectations and consequences to kids. Be consistent in implementation.

3. Use the plan, evaluate it and change it as needed.

Don’t expect behaviours to change overnight! You need to be calm, patient and consistent and expect set-backs along the way.
Adopting clear and realistic expectations

Expectations are standards or guidelines for behaviours. They convey to kids what they should or should not do. Children need clear, specific expectations so they know what you want from them. Kids want to be good but they need to know what behaviours are acceptable and not acceptable. Also expectations should be realistic and age appropriate. It is not fair to think a 5 year old should be quiet all the time or do the laundry.

As the parent you need to set these expectations.

Be specific. Stating that ‘my child should stop being bad’ is not very specific. You need to be clear in terms of the specific behaviours of your child that makes them bad, e.g., not getting out of bed on time, teasing the dog, not doing the washing up, talking back when asked to do something.

Let’s have a go at setting some specific, realistic expectations. (Have parents write some expectations and then read aloud for all members to discuss and evaluate. Some parents need a bit of help with this.)

Developing a Consequences Plan

Every time your child meets an expectation or fails to meet an expectation you must respond.

*Give attention for every time they meet the expectation (compliment, thank you, special privilege).*
*This is by far the easiest way to get your kids to meet the expectations! Use it all the time! It doesn’t take much time or effort, but it will pay off!*

When children fail to meet an expectation you need to respond. We will discuss a number of options for how to respond.
Options for Responding to Undesirable Behaviour

1. Ignore Bad Behaviour

If you assess that the behaviour is being done to get your attention it is possibly best not to reward the behaviour with your attention. Instead reward the first positive behaviour you notice after the negative behaviour concludes. Your child will learn that misbehaviour does not pay off. However be warned, if you choose this option your child will escalate their behaviour and get louder and louder hoping for a response. Be patient, ignoring does not work instantly. If you choose this, stick to it. Otherwise if you give in, your child will learn that escalating their behaviour will lead to attention. You must as soon as possible reward the good behaviour. With older kids, you might need to name it, eg., ‘I am not entering into this discussion’, ‘I’m not willing to negotiate this’. Again be patient as older kids will try and argue with you. Sometimes you might have to leave the room to ignore well. Remember only use this when you are sure that the behaviour is attention seeking. You don’t want to shut down an opportunity for meaningful conversation. If you are using ignoring a lot this is a warning signal that you may be using this method inappropriately. Use this method for example if you have already had a conversation two to three times about the same thing and your child won’t let it go.

2. Increase Supervision/Monitoring

Make increasing supervision obvious. Don’t be sneaky about it. Your child seeing you are concerned may be enough for them to meet your expectations. Let them know you have increased supervision because you are concerned about them and their behaviour and that you want to work together to make things better.
3. Loss of Meaningful Privileges

Remove something meaningful from your child, eg., unable to play on Playstation for rest of the night, unable to watch tv. Never ever take away Family Fun Time, Catch Them Being Good or One-on-One Time.

4. Invoke Something Unpleasant

There are times when you’ll choose to give something unpleasant like time out (see handouts, *Using Time-Out Effectively*), extra work or extra chores.
Using Time-Out Effectively
(adapted from Sori & Hecker, 2003)

Time-out is exactly that for a child who is misbehaving – time out or away from the problem behaviour. Time out is used instead of parents yelling or shouting or getting upset. It is also respectful of the child, while still setting limits on his or her behaviour. The parent should avoid expressing high levels of anger when the child misbehaves. Instead, just matter-of-factly put the child in time-out. The goal of time-out is not to shame or ridicule but to teach the child the behaviour is unacceptable.

**Issues You Need to Work Through Prior to Initiating Time Out**

1. Decide a good spot for time out. A time-out spot should be free of distractions. A lower stair in a stairwell away from other children or a chair facing a wall is another good example. Sending a child to a room full of toys or television is not a good idea.
2. Decide how long time-out should be. A general rule is to allow one minute in time-out for each year of the child’s life. Have a kitchen timer available.
3. Just with any other consequence for bad behaviour, explain to your children beforehand that time-out will be a consequence for certain behaviours. Explain to the child that if they sit in time-out quietly when the bell sounds they can leave time-out. If they choose to whine, argue, or misbehave they will receive extra time in time-out. (e.g., go up in one minute per offence while in time-out).

**Doing Time Out**

1. For certain behaviours you may want to give the child a warning the first and possibly second time they misbehave. Eg. If you continue to tease your sister you will be put in time-out.
2. If time-out is instituted, and the child goes to time-out voluntarily, the timer is set for the
appropriate number of minutes.

3. If the child refuses to go to time out tell them that additional minutes will be added to time-out if they do not go. (Just ignore statements such as “I don’t care if I go to time-out”, “I like time-out”).

4. Ignore the child while in time-out. Unless the child’s behaviour is disruptive, or the child is not staying in time-out, ignore the child. Avoid eye-contact and do not address the child. If the child is disruptive, you may need to add on extra time.

**Trouble-shooting**

When first instituting time-out, you may have to physically lead the child into time-out. For more behaviourally challenging children, they may actually have to be held during time-out. Hold them from behind (restrain the child as gently as possibly) and do not get into any verbal exchanges with your child. At the end, explain to the child that next time the time-out will be shorter if the child stays in time-out by themselves.

Be consistent! To be effective, just like all discipline strategies, time-out must be used consistently. If you say time-out will be for 5 minutes, then make it 5 minutes – do not bargain with children when they are in time-out.
Negative Consequences

Some parents ask about spanking. Most parents use spanking when they are angry. We recommend that you do not spank your children. There are far more effective ways of punishment. Spanking is physical violence. We think it’s a bad message to teach your children that physical violence is sometimes ok. If you choose to spank please think very carefully about it and never, never do it when you are angry!!

What kind of unpleasant consequences would work for your children e.g., washing up, coming home early?

When using negative consequences describe the behaviour that you don’t like rather than the child. For instance tell the child, ‘I do not like it when you tease your sister’, rather than ‘You are a bad person for teasing your sister’.

Give Choosing a Consequence and Communicating Your Expectations and Consequences to Your Children handouts and do a role play for communicating expectations to children. Have participants get into pairs and practise.
Choosing a Consequence

We recommend you think about four important points before deciding on a consequence.

4. Is it a fair consequence? Does the punishment fit the crime?

5. Can you follow through consistently with the consequence? Without consistency kids cannot learn what the expectations are.

6. Will this consequence help your child learn about the consequences themselves?

7. Try and use the least harsh consequence that will control the behaviour. Longer punishments are not more effective than shorter ones and can be oppressive and overwhelming to the child. Also harsher punishments like being grounded for 2 weeks is harder for you to enforce than more reasonable consequences like being grounded for a day.

Often you will choose more than one type of consequences. We recommend using ‘Catch Them Being good’ or some other kind of positive attention when kids meet your expectations.
Communicating Your Expectations and Consequences to Your Children

You need to specify the whats, the whys and the consequences of meeting your expectations and not meeting your expectations.

Sit down with your child at a time when there is no distractions e.g., tv, toys, other children. Tell them:

1. What the expectation is
2. Why this is important to you
3. What positive things will happen if they meet the expectations
4. What negative things will happen if they don’t meet the expectations

Simplify requests – look them in the eye, use their name, make a simple request, ask them to repeat it, thank them.

Make sure your child understood what you told them. Write it down for them. Ask them to repeat it for you. Ask your child how they feel about this. Use your 5 listening skills.

Troubleshooting
If your change plan is not working effectively think
1. Are my expectations realistic and clear
2. Do my children understand it
3. Are the consequences meaningful and enforceable

4. Am I consistent in my positive and negative consequences. Inconsistency is most often the reason for problems with discipline

Also having too many expectations can impede your ability to be consistent with each expectation.

Children will continue to test you. Even when you think you have a behaviour in check, children will test you out just to make sure. Remember stay calm and be consistent in your plan.

You need to make sure you are consistent in both providing positive consequences when your child meets the expectations and negative consequences for when your child does not. If you are consistent your children will take you seriously and reduce arguments and negotiation attempts.

Try to limit your expectations. Manage only those behaviours which are important enough to you to be specific about, attend to, and consistently reward and punish.

Often your mood can get in the way of providing discipline. Research shows that stressed parents use harsher and inconsistent punishment. This as we know does not teach your children about good behaviour and is likely to lead to your children behaving even worse. Let your children know ahead of time that you in a bad mood because of ‘xyz’ e.g, a bad day at work. Do not say you are in a bad mood because of the other parent. This will keep your child from feeling guilty or thinking that they have done something wrong if you need to take some time out for yourself.
Have a bath or a quiet coffee. Dinner can wait 10 minutes. Use your anger management skills e.g., self-coping statements ‘I don’t need to lose it at my child’s bad behaviour’.

Acknowledge that discipline is hard but it teaches children valuable lessons that will hold them in good stead throughout their development. Remember though, when implementing any new discipline plan, some of your children’s behaviour may get worse before it gets better. This is because some children may test the limits and buck at the new system. But be patient and remember that you will have long term gain.
Tell the participants that for lots of children the expectations and rules can change between each household. Reinforce to them that this is not the end of the world. Children can cope quite ok with this. As long as they know what the rules are for each household. e.g., at Mum’s house they bathe before dinner, at Dad’s house they bathe after dinner.

4. Homework

Give out *Homework Activities* handout, which focuses on the content covered in today’s session.

5. Conclusion

Tonight we have learnt strategies on how to deal with difficult behaviour of your children. Next week we are going to spend a bit of time reviewing our parenting skills and then move onto looking at legal and financial issues.
Love and Discipline Homework Activities

1. Attempt to communicate your expectations to your children. How did it go?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

2. Did you implement the plan? Were you able to implement the consequences of the plan? How did it go?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

3. What issues arose that you might want to discuss at the next meeting?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

5. How many times did you do

Family Fun Time:

Catch Them Being Good:

One-on-One time:
Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names

Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action:
Session 7

Parenting Review, Legal Issues and Finances
This session has limited content compared to the previous weeks. This is deliberate so that material that has been left over from previous weeks can be covered in this session. In particular the previous two sessions comprised a lot of content. It might be useful to spend the first half of the session reviewing with the participants how their parenting coalition and their new post separation parenting skills are going? Perhaps think about organising them into small groups first to discuss this and then reconvene as a larger group. As much as possible, when participants ask for advice, try to elicit comments from other group members.

Session 7 Agenda

1. Review homework
2. When Things Go Wrong – What Are My Legal Options?
3. Managing my finances
4. Homework
5. Conclusion

1. Review Homework

Ask participants each to discuss how their week went and how implementing their discipline plan went? Spend a bit of time troubleshooting any difficulties and brainstorming ideas for improvement.

2. When Things Go Wrong – What Are My Legal Options?

Have participants discuss their experience of the legal system in relation to separation and parenting. Give out the Family Law Act Information and Your Feelings About Court handouts, and provide participants with up to date information regarding their legal rights and responsibilities. Of course it is important to let them know that you can not give them legal advice.
Make up a handout of relevant phone numbers (in your local area) that you can hand out to participants or give out relevant brochures (e.g., Legal Aid, Community Legal Center).
Family Law Act Information

The Family Law Act does not talk about parents' rights, but about the responsibilities of parents and the rights of children.

The Parenting and Child Health Website is an Australian website providing resources to parents regarding child development, and outlines the following:

- Both parents have the responsibility for the on-going care, welfare and development of the children. Important decisions about health, schooling, religion and legal decisions (eg getting a passport for a child, changing a child's name) are decisions that should be made by both parents.
- Children have the right to know and be cared for by both parents.
- Children have the right to regular contact with both parents (and other special people, including family members).
- The child's best interests (not the parents') are the most important considerations in making decisions about children.
- Children's views should be considered by parents.
- Children need protection from harm, including witnessing violence.
- Decisions about children should be based on each child's unique circumstances.

Link to the Parenting and Child Health Website:
Your Feelings About Court

Parents can find it difficult going to court

The whole process can leave parents feeling bewildered and frustrated and can sometimes drive more of a wedge between them.

Why? Because:

- Things which were private before are now written on paper
- People may think that the most terrible untruths have been presented about them without proof
- Parents can feel upset about the things said in court or the decisions that are made.

If you're in this situation you may hear things being described in ways you don't agree with or which make you look like a bad parent. It's important to be able to cope with this. You have to be able to tell your side of the story to the judge without being so upset or angry that you can't get across what you mean.

What parents can do

- Be patient. It can take time to sort things out in court. If you are finding it stressful, find ways to look after yourself. Talk to someone.
- Remember that the other parent is likely to feel upset as well. This may mean that he or she says some hurtful things, does not tell the whole story, or 'paints a picture' which is quite different from what you believe happened.
- Make sure you have a break from thinking about court all the time.
- Ask friends and family not to talk about it at times, even though they are just concerned for you. Find things that can distract you for a while.
• Make sure you feel comfortable with your lawyer, if you have one, and that your lawyer really understands what you want. After all, the lawyer's job is to stand up for your rights. Keep focused on what your children need.

• Let the court know, as best you can, how things are. You are going to court because you and the other parent haven't been able to sort things out. It then becomes the judge's decision and you have to find ways to come to grips with it and move on with life.

• You are there to sort out what's best for your children. Think again if you find you want to 'get even' with the other parent. Don't get caught up in 'winning'. This approach may end up hurting everyone, especially your children.

• Find ways to feel more at ease in the court setting if it is strange and scary. Ask to have a look in a court room before the set date.

This information was obtained from 'Parenting and Child Health' Website. This is an Australian website providing resources to parents regarding child development. Link: (http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=99&id=1557)
3. Managing My Finances

Ask participants how have things changed financially for them since separation? How have they coped? What have they had to do?

Distribute the *Fortnightly Budget* handout to the group and discuss the benefits of developing and implementing a budget. Be sure to tell them that this comes from the publication *Me and My Money* from the Child Support Agency, and that other useful brochures and information in relation to these issues are available from this agency.

4. Homework

Give the homework handout to participants and inform them that the homework this week calls for reflection on many aspects of the course material covered so far, i.e. how they and their children are coping with the separation, interparental conflict, the quality of parent’s relationships with their children, discipline, going to court and finances. This is in preparation for the course review in the final session.

5. Summary

Today we have reviewed your parenting skills and looked at legal and financial issues. Next week is our last session and we will be doing a general review of the course and looking forward to the future! Flag to participants that a small farewell party will be held to conclude the program. Decide whether FMC will provide food for the party, or whether participants will be required to bring something to share, and notify the group either way.
Fortnightly Budget

(From the publication *Me and My Money* by the Child Support Agency)

You'll probably need to search for some old bills to help you estimate the fortnightly figures here. Let's say you have bills for car maintenance or telephone going back a year — simply add them up and divide the total by 26 to estimate a fortnightly figure.

Where you don't have enough old bills, receipts or cheque butts, you will just have to guess. It's a good idea to allow a little extra to cover increase in use or rise in charges.

If you think of any regular payments not on the list, put the fortnightly amount under ‘other’ with a short description.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>$ per fortnight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent or board</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second mortgage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water/sewerage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council rates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body corporate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas (mains or bottled)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oil/wood for heating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone/mobile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Car/motorbike/boat/trailer/caravan</strong></td>
<td><strong>$ per fortnight</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repayments</td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Driver’s licence</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle maintenance</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorists’ association e.g. NRMA</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular car parking</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th><strong>Insurance</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House: building</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House: contents</td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal property (valuables, bike etc.)</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car/motorbike/caravan</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life cover</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private health cover</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superannuation</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>_______________</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>School fees</td>
<td>_______________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Amount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary fees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular costs (ballet, tennis etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra coaching (maths etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult course costs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Course material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other regular payments</strong></td>
<td>$ per fortnight</td>
</tr>
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<td>Child support</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union subscription</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal loans (computer, TV, boat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club subscriptions (gym, book club)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regular donations</strong></td>
<td>$ per fortnight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity/church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**REMEMBER…**
- Include the cost of new tyres, brake linings etc. in ‘Vehicle maintenance’.
- Bills for heating (gas, electricity, oil etc.) will be higher in winter.
My Reflections on the Course

Make a comment about each of the following (it could be what you have learnt, or how something has or has not changed or it might be an area that you need to do more work on).

1. How are my children coping with the separation?

2. How am I coping with the separation?

3. What is the conflict like between me and my ex?

4. What have I done to improve my parenting relationship?

5. What have I done to enhance my relationship with my children?

6. How have I changed the way I discipline my children?

7. Is court really necessary? And/or do I need to rethink my budget?
### Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitators Names</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Parents first names in attendance:**

**Which activities did you do?**

**Discuss any concerns with the program content:**

**Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action:**
Session 8:

A Review of
Things Learned and Moving on:
Where To From Here, Dating, Setbacks and Beyond
It is important to be mindful when terminating with this group, given that the losses and separations previously experienced in former relationships may stimulate unresolved conflicts at the ending phase of the program and make termination difficult for some participants. The aim of the final session is to reflect upon and cement changes that the participants have achieved, encourage continued learning and practise of the techniques imparted throughout the course, and to provide a positive experience of termination so that therapeutic gains may be carried into the future. The following activities are designed to address these important aims. A farewell party to conclude the program is suggested, so make sure to leave at least 20 minutes at the end for this to take place.

**Session 8 Agenda**

1. Review Homework
2. Dating and New Relationships
3. Three Things I Have Learned
4. What about Setbacks?
5. Support From Each Other
6. Goal Attainment
7. Saying Goodbye

**1. Review Homework**

Ask participants to provide some feedback on the reflection homework task, and ask if any questions came up for them in reflecting on their progress which could be addressed in today’s session.

**2. Dating and New Relationships**

Ask participants what their experiences have been thus far on dating and new relationships. Given that this course is focused on children, ask participants what
they have done to help their children adjust to their new relationship. Give out *Moving On* and *Making Step-Families Work* handouts.
1. New relationships post separation can trigger flashbacks and may be a bit of a crisis time.

2. Give and expect respect and privacy from the new mate, the other parent and yourself.

3. Expect issues such as children’s living arrangements, support, and authority to be re-discussed in response to new relationships.

4. Reach out and give the other biological parent some reassurances. Let them know that you will not be moving to another state and that you will always support them being the child’s other parent.

5. The new mate can help by being sensitive to the other parent. Does the new mate really have to come along with you at each change over?

6. The new mate can help by maintaining neutrality and letting the parents make the decisions regarding their children

7. Let the stepparents and biological parents develop their own type of relationship in their own time without your interference or manipulation.

8. Let stepparents and stepchildren develop their own relationship in their own time.

9. Watch for ‘hyper-fairness’ in the children. Children really don’t want to have to choose and they also want to make sure that each parent is given a fair break.

10. Newly-weds and the like, take time to be alone as a couple.
Making Step-Families Work

(This information comes from the website: http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=99&id=1773)

Building a new family is an exciting but challenging time. It needs a lot of time, energy and hard work. There are many different kinds of stepfamilies and each will have different strengths to build on and difficulties to overcome.

The various people involved in the new stepfamily may have very different ideas about what they want and how it will work. For example:

- Grandparents may not welcome your new partner’s family.
- Teenagers may not be very enthusiastic about (or even oppositional to) your new partner.
- You and your new partner and younger children could be looking forward to it.

If these feelings are not out in the open and understood they can be stumbling blocks. Plans need to be openly discussed with everyone concerned. Stepfamilies don’t start with an empty slate. There are always losses involved.

- For the children, a remarriage might be the event that finally makes them give up their hopes that their parents will get back together again. This can happen even if the parents have been separated for many years.
- The biggest thing for parents (and often the hardest) can be letting go of the ties from a previous relationship.
- Feelings that come with separation, divorce or death are very powerful and can affect any new relationship. If you haven’t dealt with these feelings, eg. you still feel angry, sad or upset with your ex-partner, you need to get some professional support before you start a new partnership. This gives more chance for the new family to work well.
Starting a step-family

- You cannot expect your stepchildren to love you, but you can expect them to respect you, as you respect them. Stepfamilies, especially the children from the previous relationship breakdown, have had losses, eg miss having their parents together, may have to move to a new home, may lose their own bedrooms etc. In a new stepfamily situation, children might even lose their position in the family with the oldest or youngest child ending up somewhere in the middle.

- One of the biggest challenges is to overcome the tension that can exist between stepfamily members. Stepfamilies cannot be just a tight knit group (just mum, dad and the kids). There are many other people involved including former partners, their new partners and families and members of the extended families. Grandparents may be afraid they will lose contact with their grandchildren or their adult son or daughter.

- A new partner cannot suddenly become a new mother or father. Parenting will probably still need to be done by the children’s natural parents if they are still involved with their children.

- If children have been with their parent in a single parent household for a time, they may have functioned like grown-up friends to their parent. This will be hard for them to give up, particularly to their parent’s new partner.

- There may be difficulties with the children’s other parent about arrangements for ongoing contact with the children.

- All of the old family rules and traditions will need to be re-looked at, as each family will bring its own expectations to the new stepfamily.

- There are likely to be ongoing changes as children move between families.

- There may be problems with loyalty. For example, children may feel it is disloyal to their other parent to become friends with the new stepparent, especially if they really like the new stepparent.

- If you have gone from being single to being a stepparent, the cost, difficulties and disruptions in bringing up children when you are not used to it, is likely to be a big change. For example, even the way children speak today is very different from what you might be used to.
It is easy to underestimate how difficult it is to build a complicated new family. It takes years, not months, and lots of effort.

What parents can do

- Keep changes to a minimum. It can be a lot for children to manage when homes, schools and friends all have to change.
- Talk to the children and each other about your plans.
- Tell the children it will be strange at first, and will take time to get used to the new changes.
- Listen to children’s feelings.
- Let the children know that their other parent who is not living with you is important and will always be their Mum or Dad. Tell them that you will still support their rights and needs to love and be with that parent.
- Never speak badly of any of the children’s parents in front of the children, even though this may be hard.
- Understand the strong bond between your new partner and his or her children. Make time for them to be together.
- Make time for you to spend with your own children if you have them.
- Avoid taking all your partner’s time so the children feel left out, but remember to keep time for your new partnership. There won’t be a stepfamily for the children if the partnership does not work.
- Spend time building relationships with all of the children. Take it at their pace, which will be different for different children.
- Try and be flexible when plans get changed at the last minute by the other parent. Have back-up plans and don’t take it out on the children.
- Try to give children some control over things that will affect them.
- Make sure that each child has some privacy even if it is only a place or space of their own in each house.
- If it can be managed, find a new place to live so it is a beginning for everyone. It will be harder for everyone to feel they belong if you live in the home of one of the previous families.
Decide that unless the children are very young, each parent should discipline their own children and not expect their new partner to do it, especially at first. If the stepparent does the discipline and does not do exactly as the other parent would it can cause problems for everyone. However, if there is a personal problem between the stepparent and the child, the stepparent will need to deal with it. For example, if a stepchild speaks rudely to you, you have a right to say that you will not respond to that kind of talk.

Work out what will be the new rules and traditions for your new family.

New ways for celebrating birthdays and other special times, eg Christmas, will need to be worked out. Be prepared to make changes.

Allow children time to sort out their feelings. There may be behaviour problems, unfriendliness or disagreements while they sort it all out.

Keep a diary of stepfamily events. It will help you to see the progress you have made and help build the history of the new family.

Reminders

- Live for one day at a time and plan for short periods. Don't expect to be "happy ever after" by next week!
- Stepfamilies are usually decided by two adults who want to be together. The children may not share the same feelings about it.
- Never fight in front of the children or step children.
- Remind yourself why you fell in love with your partner in the first place and make time and ways to take care of that love.
- Keep your own individual interests as adults and encourage the individual interests and activities of all the children.
- Every family and stepfamily is unique. What works for someone else may not be what works for you.
- Be honest about your feelings and sensitive about how you express them.
- Listen to the feelings of all the others in the family.

The Stepfamily Association of Victoria Inc is an information based organisation, providing information to stepfamilies and to various community organisations. Contact this organisation for advice and support.
3. Three Things I Have Learned

Participants have learned so much during this course, and are not likely to remember everything! Recommend that every now and again they refer back to some of the handouts for a refresher. Ask each participant to write down the 3 most important things they have learned from this course. Alternatively, they could write down the 3 things they will remember, or the 3 skills they are likely to use most.

4. What About Setbacks?

Let the participants know that it is inevitable that they will have setbacks. Say that it is like being on a diet and you have something that you shouldn’t. It is how the participants respond to the setbacks that matters!

Ask participants what setbacks they might be able to foresee. Write these up on the board, then ask them how they will deal/cope with them?

- Concentrate on what you have achieved and what has changed
- Challenge negative thinking such as ‘I’ve failed’
- Use self-coping statements.

Give out Setbacks – They Are Natural handout.
Setbacks – They are Natural

Setbacks are going to happen! When a setback occurs the following might help:

- Concentrate on what you have achieved and what has changed
- Challenge negative thinking such as ‘I’ve failed’
- Use self-coping statements.

What else can you do?
5. Support from Each Other

Each group is different and some groups will like to keep in touch with each other. Sensitively gauge if this is the case with this group, and emphasise that sharing contact details with the group is optional. If appropriate, you may like to pass a piece of paper around for participants to write down their contact details for photocopying and distributing to the group.

6. Goal Attainment

Hand out to participants their original Goals and Expectations worksheet. Ask them to rewrite each of their goals onto the Goals and Expectations Achieved handout below and rate the extent to which each goal has been achieved throughout the duration of the program. This will give them an indication of what has changed and what they still need to work on in the future.

7. Saying Goodbye

It might be helpful to provide a brief summary of the topics and techniques covered throughout the program as an overview. Congratulate the participants for attending and on the gains they have made, and normalize any feelings of sadness that participants may have in relation to the group ending. Encourage them to continue applying the knowledge they have gained through their participation in the program, and commence the farewell party to conclude.
Goals and Expectations Achieved

Using this scale, rate how successful you have been in achieving the goals you set at the beginning of the course. Re-write each goal below and rate on the scale how much it has been achieved.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------------------------------|
| not at all achieved | a little achieved | moderately achieved | mostly achieved | completely achieved |

1.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

2.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

3.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

4.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

5.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
Post Separation Parenting Program Session Notes

Facilitators Names  Date

Parents first names in attendance:

Which activities did you do?

Discuss any concerns with the program content:

Discuss any participant concerns and a plan for action

;
APPENDIX D

Family Mediation Centre Plain Language Statement, Deakin University Plain Language Statements for Waitlist and Pre Participants, Consent Form & Post and Follow-Up Letters
Dear Group Participant

As part of the Family Mediation Centre's ongoing commitment to quality assurance, we are evaluating the benefits of the Post Separation Parenting Program you will be attending. We are doing this in conjunction with Deakin University, School of Psychology. We ask that you please complete the enclosed questionnaires. You will also be asked to fill in another questionnaire immediately after you have completed the program and then again 3 months after the last session.

Your details will remain strictly confidential. A report will be written on the basis of the results but no identifying material will be evident from the report.

It is not compulsory that you complete the questionnaires. However, your feedback will help us to improve the program in the future. In this light, we encourage you to participate.

Please feel free to speak to your group facilitators if you have any further questions.

Yours faithfully,

Signature Redacted by Library

Mary-Rose Yunczen
Chief Executive Officer -
Family Mediation Centre
Project Title: Post-Separation Parenting Program Development and Evaluation

My name is Gillian Campbell and I am a Doctor of Psychology (Clinical) candidate at Deakin University. Under the supervision of Dr Susie Sweeper, a lecturer/researcher in the School of Psychology at Deakin University, and in collaboration with the Family Mediation Centre (FMC), I am undertaking a research study to evaluate the effectiveness of the Post Separation Parenting Program (PSPP) that you are eligible to participate in at FMC.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research, which requires you to complete a set of questionnaires. Specifically, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your feelings towards your former partner, feelings of loneliness and negative emotions, the level of conflict that exists between you and your former partner, your relationship with your children and how you feel you and your children are coping with the separation overall. Examples of questions include ‘My former partner and I arrange child visitation well’, ‘I can comfort my child/children in relation to the separation’, ‘I felt I was using a lot of nervous energy’, and ‘Do you often feel ‘fed up’?’.. You will be asked to answer these questionnaires at a number of different time points e.g., at least one month before the program commences, one week prior to the program commencing, at the completion of the program, and three months after the group ends. Each questionnaire should take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

Conducting this type of research is important as it has implications for separated families in regards to improving services, increasing treatment options and developing policy.

It is possible that answering some of the questions could cause you to feel some sadness or distress, given the sensitive nature of the topic. If this occurs to you and you would like to talk to someone about it please do not hesitate to contact your group leader at FMC.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdraw your participation in the study will cease immediately and any information obtained from you will not be used. Ceasing your participation in the research will not impact on your ability to continue participating in the Post Separation Parenting Program.

Any data or information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet at Deakin University for a minimum of six years, at which time the data will be destroyed. Only the researchers named below will have access to this information. Data entered into the computer will be coded and therefore you will remain unidentified. A summary of the findings in aggregate form will be made available to you by contacting either FMC or the researcher at the end of the year on the contact details below.

Should you agree to participate in this study, please complete and return the enclosed consent form and questionnaire in the reply-paid envelope provided.

If you have any further questions regarding the study please email myself, Gillian Campbell (Principal Investigator), at gvc@deakin.edu.au or Dr Susie Sweeper (Research Supervisor) at susie.sweeper@deakin.edu.au.

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the research please contact the Chair, Professor Mark Stokes, Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee – Health & Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University.
Tel: (03) 9244 6865.
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE
PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

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Conducting this type of research is important as it has implications for separated families in regards to improving services, increasing treatment options and developing policy.

It is possible that answering some of the questions could cause you to feel some sadness or distress, given the sensitive nature of the topic. If this occurs to you and you would like to talk to someone about it please do not hesitate to contact your group leader at FMC.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdraw your participation in the study will cease immediately and any information obtained from you will not be used. Ceasing your participation in the research will not impact on your ability to continue participating in the Post Separation Parenting Program.

Any data or information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet at Deakin University for a minimum of six years, at which time the data will be destroyed. Only the researchers named below will have access to this information. Data entered into the computer will be coded and therefore you will remain unidentified. A summary of the findings in aggregate form will be made available to you by contacting either FMC or the researcher at the end of the year on the contact details below.

Should you agree to participate in this study, please complete and return the enclosed consent form and questionnaire in the reply-paid envelope provided.

If you have any further questions regarding the study please email myself, Gillian Campbell (Principal Investigator), at gvc@deakin.edu.au or Dr Susie Sweeper (Research Supervisor) at susie.sweeper@deakin.edu.au.

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the research please contact the Chair, Professor Mark Stokes, Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee – Health & Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University. Tel: (03) 9244 6865.
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE
CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Post Separation Parenting Program Development and Evaluation

I, ……………………………………….. hereby consent to be a subject of a human research study to be undertaken by Gillian Campbell and Dr Susie Sweeper. I understand that the purpose of the research is to assess the effectiveness of the Family Mediation Centre Post Separation Parenting Program.

I acknowledge that:

1. The aims, methods, anticipated benefits and possible negative consequences of the research study have been explained to me in the Plain Language Statement.
2. I voluntarily and freely give my consent to participate in the research study.
3. Any information that I provide will not be made public in any form(s) that could reveal my identity to an outside party i.e. that I will remain fully anonymous. Data entered into the computer will be coded and therefore I remain unidentified.
4. By participating in this research I have agreed to complete a survey and answer questions in relation to my relationship separation experiences and participation in a Post Separation Parenting Program.
5. I understand that aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may be reported in scientific and academic journals.
6. The Family Mediation Centre has not disclosed my personal information to anyone at Deakin University without my consent.
7. Individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and on my authorisation.
8. I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used. Ceasing my participation in the research will not impact on my ability to continue participating in the Post Separation Parenting Program.

Signature: ……………………………………………………… Date: ……………………..
Dear <participant name>,

Thank you for your participation in this research to date. As you will now be aware, this study is being completed by Deakin University on the behalf of the Family Mediation Centre in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Post-Separation Parenting Group that you are currently enrolled in.

Participation in this study involves the completion of a series of questionnaires at different time points e.g., prior to the parenting group starting, at the completion of the group, and some months after the group ends. Please find enclosed the next questionnaire in this series, which is similar in content to the questionnaire/s previously completed by you. The questionnaire involves answering questions regarding your feelings towards your former partner, feelings of loneliness and negative emotions, the level of conflict that exists between you and your former partner, your relationship with your children, and how you feel you and your children are coping overall.

Please complete and return this questionnaire in the enclosed reply-paid envelope provided.

Should you have any questions or concerns in relation to this research, please do not hesitate to contact myself, Gillian Campbell (Principal Investigator) via email at gvc@deakin.edu.au or Dr Susie Sweeper (Research Supervisor) by phone on (03) 9251 7210 or via email at susie.sweeper@deakin.edu.au.

Again, thank you for your valuable participation.

Regards,

Gillian Campbell
Doctor of Psychology (Clinical) Candidate
Deakin University
E: gvc@deakin.edu.au
Project Title: Post-Separation Parenting Program Development and Evaluation

Dear <participant name>,

Thank you for your participation in this research to date. As you will now be aware, this study is being completed by Deakin University on the behalf of the Family Mediation Centre in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Post-Separation Parenting Program that you participated in some months ago.

Participation in this study involves the completion of a series of questionnaires at different time points e.g., prior to the parenting program starting, at the completion of the program, and some months after the program ends. Please find enclosed the final questionnaire in this series, which is similar in content to the questionnaires previously completed by you. The questionnaire involves answering questions regarding your feelings towards your former partner, feelings of loneliness and negative emotions, the level of conflict that exists between you and your former partner, your relationship with your children, and how you feel you and your children are coping overall.

Please complete and return this questionnaire in the enclosed reply-paid envelope provided.

Should you have any questions or concerns in relation to this research, please do not hesitate to contact myself, Gillian Campbell (Principal Investigator) via email at gvc@deakin.edu.au or Dr Susie Sweeper (Research Supervisor) by phone on (03) 9251 7210 or via email at susie.sweeper@deakin.edu.au

Again, thank you for your valuable participation.

Regards,

Gillian Campbell
Doctor of Psychology (Clinical) Candidate
Deakin University
E: gvc@deakin.edu.au
APPENDIX E

Participant Questionnaire Measures
Parenting After Separation Questionnaire

Name:_______________________________________  Gender (please circle): Male / Female

Age in Years:______________ Country of Birth:______________________________________

Email address or Phone Number:________________________________________________

1. What is your highest level of education (please circle one of the below)?
   Primary Secondary   Trade or Diploma        Degree/Higher Degree

2. What is your occupation?_____________________________

3. What is your annual income (before tax)? Please include government benefits: _________ (note: this remains confidential)

4. What is your current relationship status (please circle one of the below)?
   Separated/Divorced/Single  De facto  Married

5. How long since you separated from the parent of your children? _____years______months

6. How long were you living together? (please include time living together before marriage if applicable)___________________

7. On average how often do you see your children each week (please circle one of the below)?
   5 – 7 days  3 – 4 days  1 – 2 days  less than 1 day

Please write down the contact and residency (e.g., contact and visitation) arrangements for your child/children:

8. How often do you speak to your former partner per month (face-to-face and phone)

9. On a scale of 1 to 10 how likely is it that you will go to court over parenting arrangements in the next 6 months (please circle one number on the line below)

   |-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. Was violence an issue in your relationship (please circle where appropriate)
   Emotional/Mental  YES  NO if yes, for how long?________________
   Physical  YES  NO if yes, for how long?________________
   Sexual  YES  NO if yes, for how long?________________
   Financial  YES  NO if yes, for how long?________________
   Other ____________ YES  NO if yes, for how long?________________
Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test

**Part A:** Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements for the last two weeks. Please circle only one number for each statement.

**IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I find it hard to do things without a partner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I constantly think about my former partner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel isolated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Days with special meaning for my ex-partner and I are really</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficult (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I miss my former partner a lot</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I am used to not seeing my former partner any more</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I wish my former partner and I could try to make the relationship work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I don’t really know why my former partner and I separated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I find it difficult to enjoy myself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. It is hard looking at photos and other things that remind me of my former partner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I don’t have much time to see my friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I feel like I’m on a constant emotional roller-coaster ride</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I get angry more than I used to</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I make an effort to organise social activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I feel desperately lonely</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I feel like my life has less purpose in it now</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I sometimes have difficulty controlling my emotions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I feel rejected by my former partner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Little things seem to upset me now</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Part B: IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My former partner and I agree on the child custody arrangements</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I agree with my former partner on discipline of my child / children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My former partner and I avoid speaking to one another</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When I speak to my former partner we usually fight over the child / children.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. My former partner and I arrange child visitation well.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I fight with my former partner over the well being of the child / children.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My former partner and I can talk in front of the child / children without fighting.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part C:** The following questions relate to your relationship with your child/children. If you have more than one child and you feel that you interact and relate to your children very differently then you may circle more than one number for each question.

**IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can comfort my child/children in relation to the separation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I don’t have much opportunity to bond with my child/children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My relationship with my child/children comes naturally</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Separation has not affected my relationship with my child/children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My relationship with my child/children has deteriorated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I feel included in my child/children’s life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. My child/children have fun spending time with me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parent-Child Instrument

Please answer the following questions about your relationship with your child. Circle “SA” if you strongly agree with the statement, “A” if you agree with the statement, “D” if you disagree with the statement, and “SD” if you strongly disagree with the statement. If you have more than one child and you feel that you interact and relate to your children very differently then you may circle more than one number for each question.

1. I speak to him / her in a warm and friendly voice
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

2. I do not help him/ her as much as she needs
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

3. I let her/ him do things she likes doing
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

4. I am cold toward her / him
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

5. I understand his / her problems and worries
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

6. I am affectionate toward her him
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

7. I like him / her to make her own decisions
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

8. I do not want her / him to grow up
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

9. I try to control everything she / he does
   Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

10. I invade his / her privacy
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

11. I enjoy talking things over with her / him
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

12. I frequently smile at him / her
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

13. I tend to baby her / him
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

14. I do not seem to understand what he/ she needs or wants
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

15. I let her/ him decide things for herself
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

16. I make him / her feel that she is not wanted
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

17. I can make her / him feel better when she is upset
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

18. I do not talk with him / her very much
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

19. I try to make her / him dependent on me
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

20. I feel that he / she can’t look after herself unless I am around
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

21. I give him / her as much freedom as she wants
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

22. I let her / him go out as often as she wants
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

23. I am overprotective of him / her
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD

24. I do not praise her / him
    Strongly Agree: SA  Agree: A  Disagree: D  Strongly Disagree: SD
DASS 21

Please read each statement and circle a number 0, 1, 2 or 3 which indicates how much the statement applied to you over the past week. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

The rating scale is as follows:
- 0: Did not apply to me at all
- 1: Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time
- 2: Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of the time
- 3: Applied to me very much, or most of the time

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I found it hard to wind down</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I was aware of dryness of my mouth</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I couldn’t seem to experience any positive feeling at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g., excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I tended to over-react to situations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I felt I was using a lot of nervous energy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I felt that I had nothing to look forward to</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I found myself getting agitated</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I found it difficult to relax</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I felt down-hearted and blue</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>I felt I was close to panic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>I felt I wasn’t worth much as a person</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>I felt that I was rather touchy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g., sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>I felt scared without any good reason</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>I felt that life was meaningless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following sentences describe how you might react when you disagree with your former partner. Please read each one very carefully and then answer the sentences in the way that best describes you.

How well do these statements describe how you usually react when you disagree with your partner?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>NOT AT ALL</th>
<th>NOT TOO WELL</th>
<th>FAIRLY WELL</th>
<th>VERY WELL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You clam up and hold in your feelings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>You try to avoid talking about it</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>You come right out and tell your former partner how you're feeling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>You get cool and distant, and give your former partner the cold shoulder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>You try to work out a compromise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>You try to smooth things over</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>You try to reason with your former partner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>You listen to what your former partner has to say and try to understand how he/she really feels</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>You say or do something to hurt your former partner’s feelings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>You get really angry and start yelling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>You get sarcastic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>You sulk and take a long time to get over feeling angry</td>
<td>1</td>
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In every separated family there are times when the parents don’t get along, and sometimes children witness the disagreements that occur between their parents. We would like to understand how you see the conflict that occurs between you and your former partner, and whether or not your children are exposed to this conflict. Please circle True (T), Sort of True (ST), or False (F) to indicate how you feel about each of the following statements.

Please answer all questions.

<p>| | | |</p>
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<td>My children never see my former partner and I arguing or disagreeing.</td>
<td>T  ST  F</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>When my former partner and I have an argument we usually work it out.</td>
<td>T  ST  F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>My former partner and I get really mad when we argue.</td>
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<td>My former partner and I argue or disagree a lot.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Even after my former partner and I stop arguing we stay mad at each other.</td>
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<td>When my former partner and I have a disagreement we discuss it quietly.</td>
<td>T  ST  F</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>My former partner and I are often mean to each other even when the children are around</td>
<td>T  ST  F</td>
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<td>My former partner and I have pushed or shoved each other during an argument.</td>
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<td>My former partner and I still act mean after we have had an argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>