

Jammy Brandes
Cooper County Circuit Court
200 Main, Room 26
Boonville, MO 65233

**DOES MANDATORY PARENT EDUCATION ENHANCE COMMUNICATION
BETWEEN PARENTS AS IT RELATES TO THEIR CHILDREN?**

In 1998, the Missouri General Assembly passed new legislation (Senate Bill No. 910) that mandated completion of a parent education program for all parents filing for divorce, filing a modification, or filing a paternity action if there are children under the age of eighteen born to the parents. The intent of the legislature in mandating parent education programs was to offer a low cost, one-time program that would assist parents in communicating with one another by teaching them the necessary skills.

Focus on Kids started in Cooper County in June 1999. It is a two and one-half hour parent education program developed by the University of Missouri-Columbia Human Development/Family Studies Department. Surveying of the program participants is done at the conclusion of each session by the instructor using an evaluation questionnaire consisting of forty-five questions that must be answered by the participants prior to receiving their certificate of completion for the program.

The goal of this study was to determine if mandatory parent education enhanced communication between parents as it relates to their children. Two research questions were used to address that question:

- 1) Did the program assist the participants in understanding how their children are affected by divorce?
- 2) Did the program assist the participants in understanding the importance of communicating regarding decisions about the children?

The responses to six questionnaire items that related to these two research questions were tabulated and analyzed. The results indicated that the parent education program provided useful information to parents. Ninety percent or more of the participants responded that the program was beneficial to them and they understand the importance of working cooperatively with their former spouse as it relates to their children.

It is recommended that a follow-up study be conducted to review the court files of the participants for post divorce litigation filings. This information would give some indication of how successfully parents communicated with one another based on the number of modifications filed pertaining to child support and child custody. It may also be beneficial to evaluate the parent education program by analyzing the survey results as it pertains to age of participants, sex of participants, race, length of marriage, economic status, and number of children. This type of demographic information will provide the instructor beneficial information as to what areas of the program needs enhancing.

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