Lessons for a COVID-19 era: Barriers and facilitators to court ordered online parenting programs for divorcing and separating parents

Claire S. Tomlinson | Brittany N. Rudd | Amy G. Applegate | Anjolii Diaz | Amy Holtzworth-Munroe

Abstract
Family courts are increasingly interested in online parenting programs for divorcing and separating parents, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. To our knowledge, no previous study has evaluated the barriers to and facilitators of parent participation in these programs for family law cases. We interviewed 61 parents in the midst of family law cases regarding their perspectives. While many parents viewed online parent programs positively (e.g., convenient), they also reported barriers to participation (e.g., technology problems). We offer recommendations (e.g., communication about program benefits) to support courts as they decide whether to continue ordering online parent programs following the pandemic.

Key points for practitioners
- Brief online parenting programs are increasingly offered to separating and divorcing parents, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Despite the intent to increase access, there is limited empirical evidence indicating that online parent education programs are more accessible than in-person programs for all parents.
Qualitative findings of barriers and facilitators to program access and completion indicate that though online programs are generally viewed positively, some parents continue to encounter barriers to participation, for example, technology issues.

Recommendations for eliminating parental barriers to online parenting education program access and completion include using more intensive recruitment and engagement strategies and providing more technology support, giving extra time to complete programming, and exploring avenues for social support.

INTRODUCTION

Parental separation or divorce is one of the most frequent adverse childhood experiences. The current divorce rate in the United States is 40% (CDC, 2018). Also, 40% of children in the U.S. are born to unmarried parents (CDC, 2018), with these children experiencing parental instability at a higher rate than those born to married parents (Osborne et al., 2007). On average, children whose parents are divorced or separated (hereafter collectively referred to as “separated parents”), compared to peers whose parents remain together, are at higher risk for experiencing psychological distress, mental health disorders, and engaging in risky behaviors (Lamela et al., 2016). Decreases in positive co-parenting and effective parenting (e.g., child monitoring, consistent discipline, parental affection and support, and good parent–child communication) following separation may partially explain the associations between parental separation and children's maladjustment (Lamela et al., 2016). Thus, supporting parenting and co-parenting can mitigate the negative effects of parental separation on children (Elam et al., 2019; Sandler et al., 2020).

Most family courts align their practices with a public health approach to mental health promotion and targeted prevention (i.e., providing prevention to at-risk populations) (Atkins et al., 2016; Rudd & Beidas, 2020; Salem et al., 2013). These family courts who serve parents during the course of their separation often mandate parents to complete programs designed to educate parents about separation, parenting, and co-parenting. Pollet and Lombreglia (2008) found that 46 U.S. states offered or required parent education programs. Court-ordered parenting programs are often in-person and tend to be short, with the majority lasting fewer than 5 h (Fackrell et al., 2011). Courts across the country, however, have indicated concern regarding the rate of parent program attendance (Cookston et al., 2002), which ranges from 30 to 80% (Duppong-Hurley et al., 2016).

There is a large, existing body of research regarding the barriers to parenting programs in general, although not necessarily focused on court-utilized programs (Myttynen et al., 2014; Whittaker & Cowley, 2012; Winslow et al., 2009). These barriers include practical concerns, such as lack of transportation and childcare, time demands, and scheduling conflicts (Myttynen et al., 2014). Single-parent families, larger families (e.g., multiple children), and families from poor neighborhoods or with lower socio-economic status (Myttynen et al., 2014) are particularly at risk for infrequent program attendance. Parenting programs that require a greater time commitment, such as multiple sessions or homework assignments, have the lowest attendance rates (15–20%; Winslow et al., 2009). This evidence is concerning given that programs empirically demonstrated to be the most effective are longer than 5 hours (e.g., 10 sessions) and emphasize at-home practice of skills (Wolchik et al., 2002; Berkel et al., 2018).
One strategy for overcoming barriers to accessing and completing parenting programs is to transform an in-person program into a digital intervention (e.g., Danaher et al., 2015; Wantland et al., 2004). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some court systems had adopted this strategy and were moving towards the use of online programs for separating parents (Bowers et al., 2011), which was assumed to make programs more accessible (Bowers et al., 2011). However, the COVID-19 era has placed significant pressure on courts to rapidly move programming online, with increasing numbers of courts adopting short online parenting programs to allow individuals continued access to programming (Sourdin & Zeleznikow, 2020). Unfortunately, we could find no empirical research regarding facilitators and barriers to parent attendance in these online programs.

CURRENT STUDY

This article reports the results of a study designed to identify potential facilitators of and barriers to parent participation in court-ordered online parenting programs. This study was conducted as part of a larger randomized controlled trial (RCT) designed to compare the differential effectiveness of two online parenting programs (i.e., Two Families Now (TFN; Caraway & Jones, 2011); and Children in Between (CIB; Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996)). Participants in these programs were compared to a no-program control group among a sample that included divorcing parents and unmarried parents who were addressing child-related issues in their cases for the first time. We encountered participation issues at various points in the RCT, and thus, in the current study, we interviewed parents who were eligible for the RCT to understand their perspectives regarding barriers to and facilitators of participation in the online programs. We also explored differences in barriers and facilitators by gender and family law case type (e.g., divorce cases versus cases with never-married parents of children (“paternity cases”)). While the interviews occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these parents' perspectives have strong implications for the use of online parent education programs during family law cases throughout and after the pandemic.

METHODS

Participants

Recruitment for the RCT took place in Delaware County, Indiana, a midwestern primarily rural county with a population of approximately 115,000 people, the majority of whom are white (89%) and have an average household income of $43,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Parents were recruited from the Delaware County Circuit Court a unified court system which maintains seven courts, staffed by elected judges, a Juvenile Magistrate and a Master Commissioner. Only parents in initial paternity cases or divorce cases with child-related issues were eligible for the RCT. Additional eligibility criteria included: 1) speaking English, 2) being 18 years of age or older, 3) not being incarcerated, and 4) having provided the court with at least minimal contact information. During the period of recruitment for the current qualitative study, 990 individual parents were eligible for the RCT.

For the current qualitative study, parents also had to meet one of the following conditions: they had already had their final or dispositive hearing to decide custody issues, had their case dismissed, or had waived their final hearing. These criteria were intended to reduce the possibility of parents perceiving any coercion from the court to complete the current study or falsely believing that completing the study would affect their court outcome. In addition, parents with attorney representation were excluded due to the complexity of obtaining consent for study participation (i.e., ethically, we could not directly contact represented parents). Parents were compensated for the current study interview – $25 for an interview 30 minutes for fewer, and $50 for an interview lasting more than 30 minutes. Interview length was determined by how many interview questions were relevant to their case and how much time the
We followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) reporting guidelines (Tong et al., 2007).

Recruitment procedures

See Figure 1 for a flowchart of participant recruitment for the current qualitative study. The study was approved by the Indiana University institutional review board. RCT eligible parents received a one-page court order to access a court website that informed them whether they were court-ordered to complete an online parenting program. The court order informed parents that, if ordered to complete a program, they had 30 days to access and complete the program, and that the online parenting programs could be completed on a device of their choosing. The order also provided information about using public library computers if they did not possess devices to access a program. In addition, the order informed parents that the programs were free,1 took 3–5 h to complete, and parents could complete them in sections and on their own time. The court order

FIGURE 1  Participant recruitment of the qualitative interview study

1Note that the program developers of Children in Between (https://online.divorce-education.com/) and Two Families Now (https://www.twofamiliesnow.com/) provided their programs to parents for free during the duration of the study. Usually, parents pay a fee to participate in the programs.
was signed by a judge. When parents accessed the court website, they were told to complete one of two online programs or no program (i.e., they had been randomly assigned to one of the three study conditions) and invited to participate in a voluntary research study (i.e., the ongoing RCT). If the parent had not accessed the court website approximately 1 week after a court order was sent, the parent was reminded to access the court website and follow the instructions on the website.

A court intern provided the research team with court-gathered party contact information for parties eligible for the current study. After verifying the current study eligibility requirements, research assistants contacted parents, by mail, phone, email or text, to invite them to participate in the current study interview. We attempted to contact each potential participant 12 to 15 times. Participants were initially mailed a study invitation and consent form for the current study. Street mailing address information was available for all 278 eligible parents; the 128 parents who provided email addresses were also sent emails. Text messaging was used infrequently, as only 12 parents had agreed to allow contact via text messaging. Participants were then called every 2–3 days, at different hours of the day, and research assistants left voicemails. On average, parents were contacted 130.17 days (SD = 96.02 days), or 4.34 months, after the initial court order had been sent. When a potential study participant was reached, a research assistant explained the current interview study and invited the parent to participate. Both parents in a given court case, if eligible, were independently invited to participate.

Qualitative interview

There were two main points in the RCT study procedures where we observed a precipitous drop in parents’ engagement. The first was parents not complying with the court order to access the court website to see if they were ordered to complete a parenting program. Drop-off here was large, with 53% of parents not accessing the website. The second was parents who accessed the website, and were court-ordered to complete an online program, but never accessed or completed the program. This occurred for 19% of parents who accessed the court website and were assigned to complete a program. Thus, the current study’s semi-structured interview focused on understanding the reasons for parents’ lack of engagement at these two points in the process.

Grounded in the literature regarding barriers to parenting programs (Mytton et al., 2014; Whittaker & Cowley, 2012; Winslow et al., 2009), we designed the interview to assess parents’ perspectives of the convenience of the online programs, technology, the role the court might play in supporting their completion of the program, and whether parties thought that they would have preferred an online or in-person program. For each area of inquiry, we first asked an open ended question (e.g., “Could you tell us about why you didn’t do the online parenting program you were assigned to do?”), followed by several prompts (e.g., “Accessing the parenting program required some technology such as a computer, tablet, or smart phone. Would you have been able to get online via a computer, tablet, or smart phone?”; “Did you think that doing the parenting program would have been inconvenient?”).

A total of 61 parents were interviewed, and they varied in their level of access of the court website and online programs. The interview guides were tailored to each level of access. See Tables 1 and 2 for levels of access, sections of the interview, and sample sizes. The full interviews are available from the authors upon request.

All interviews were conducted by phone. Interviewers used a template that included all questions and transcribed interview responses live during the interview. Responses were de-identified as necessary. Interviewers were seven undergraduate research assistants, a project coordinator with a bachelors degree in psychology, and a doctoral student in clinical psychology. Each interviewer completed an average of 6.78 (SD = 7.39) interviews. None of the interviewers knew the interviewees personally.
We utilized an integrated coding approach (Bradley et al., 2007) to design the coding system. We first selected codes deductively to align with our semi-structured interview guide that asked questions about online parenting program convenience, technology, preference for online versus in-person programming, and overall perception of the program. We also inductively selected codes by reviewing approximately half of the interviews and identifying emergent codes. Given our interest, each code was then labeled as either a barrier or facilitator to engagement in online parenting programs.

Undergraduate research assistants \((k = 3)\) were trained to code interview transcripts using a coding manual that explained the coding system, defined each code, and gave example responses for each code. Each undergraduate spent roughly 1 h in training with the master coder, with training time varying depending on the research assistant’s other work assignments and coding experience. Coders coded an average of 20.3 \((SD = 11.3)\) interviews. To measure inter-coder reliability, each transcribed interview was coded both by the “master” coder and one undergraduate research assistant, and Cohen’s kappa (1960) was used to determine agreement between each undergraduate coder and the master coder regarding each code. The average agreement was acceptable, \(k = .81\) (Neuendorf, 2002; range .67–.92). Final thematic analyses were conducted with the codes derived from the master coder.

We present our results in three sections. First, we provide an overview of our participants, including their demographics and relationship history (see Tables 1 and 2). Second, we present the barriers to accessing the court website from the eight parents who did not access it (see Table 3). Third, we present the barriers and facilitators to accessing and

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**Table 1** Levels of parent participation and related interview sections

| N  | Level of parent participation in process and program | Portions of interview administered                  |
|----|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 10 | No memory of receiving court order                 | Hypothetical questions about the program             |
| 8  | Remembered receiving court order, but did not go to the court website | Barriers to court website access; hypothetical questions about the program |
| 16 | Remembered receiving court order, went to court website, and were not assigned to a program | Hypothetical questions about the program             |
| 7  | Remembered receiving court order, went to court website, were assigned to program, but did not complete program | Hypothetical questions about the program             |
| 20 | Remembered receiving court order, went to court website, were assigned to program, and completed program | Questions about the program                          |

Total: 61 interviewed

Note: Research assistants determined level of parent participation by asking parents.

**Table 2** Interview sections and sample sizes

| Section                           | Parents asked these questions                                      |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Barriers to Court Website Access  | 8 parents who did not access court website                         |
| Hypothetical Questions About Program | 38 parents: \((10 + 8 + 16 + 7) = 41\) parties not asked hypothetical questions about the program due to change in interview early in study |
| Questions About Program           | 20 parents who completed a program                                 |

**Analytic method**

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completing the program from the perspectives of parents who did access the court website. This section is further broken into the themes: convenience, technology problems, preferences for online versus in-person programs, and court factors. Within each theme, we first highlight overall findings regardless of program completion or marital status at the time of the family court case. We then note differences in the frequency with which parents report each theme by whether they completed the program and their case type (e.g., divorce or unmarried). We used chi squares to make these comparisons (see Table 4). In results not shown, we stratified by program completion status and explored differences by marital status at the time of the family law case (e.g., divorcing or unmarried) and gender. There were two differences by marital status, which we highlight in text, and no differences by gender (full results available from the authors).

TABLE 3 Individual demographic data

|                          | Unmarried mean (SD) | Divorcing mean (SD) | Unmarried N/N (%) | Divorcing N/N (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Gender                   |                     |                     |                   |                   |
| Female                   | 31/43 (72.1)        | 12/18 (66.6)        |                   |                   |
| Male                     | 12/43 (27.9)        | 6/18 (33.3)         |                   |                   |
| Age in years             | 31.77 (7.20) **     | 37.22 (9.64) **     |                   |                   |
| Education                |                     |                     |                   |                   |
| Years                    | 12.93 (1.14) *      | 13.83 (2.09) *      |                   |                   |
| Hispanic or Latino (% yes) |                   |                     |                   |                   |
| White                    | 29/42 (69)          | 15/18 (83.3)        |                   |                   |
| Black                    | 10/42 (23.8)        | 3/18 (16.6)         |                   |                   |
| Biracial or multiracial  | 3/42 (7.1)          | 0/18 (0)            |                   |                   |
| Main daily activities (could choose more than one) |                     |                     |                   |                   |
| Working full time        | 22/41 (53.7)        | 10/17 (58.8)        |                   |                   |
| Working part time        | 11/40 (27.5)        | 4/17 (23.5)         |                   |                   |
| Full time home/family responsibilities | 5/40 (13.5) | 1/17 (5.8) |                   |                   |
| Student                  | 2/40 (5)            | 0/17 (0)            |                   |                   |
| Disabled                 | 0/40 (0)            | 1/17 (5.8)          |                   |                   |
| Unemployed               | 0/40 (0)            | 1/17 (5.8)          |                   |                   |
| Finances at the end of the month |                  |                     |                   |                   |
| Not enough to make ends meet | 18/42 (42.9) | 6/18 (33.3)        |                   |                   |
| Enough to make ends meet | 13/42 (31)          | 6/18 (33.3)         |                   |                   |
| Some money left over     | 11/42 (26.2)        | 6/18 (33.3)         |                   |                   |
| Number of own children under age 18 currently living in household | 1.47 (1.35) | 1.18 (1.07) |                   |                   |
| Number of other children under age 18 currently living in household | .19 (.51) | .22 (.73) |                   |                   |
| Housemates               |                     |                     |                   |                   |
| None                     | 28/42 (66.7)        | 10/18 (55.6)        |                   |                   |
| New partner              | 6/43 (14)           | 3/18 (16.7)         |                   |                   |
| Roommate, acquaintance, friend | 4/43 (9.3) | 2/18 (11.1) |                   |                   |
| Other relatives          | 2/43 (4.7)          | 1/18 (5.6)          |                   |                   |
| Other parent in this case | 1/43 (2.3) | 1/18 (5.6) |                   |                   |
| Parents                  | 1/43 (2.3)          | 0/18 (0)            |                   |                   |
| Other                    | 0/43 (0)            | 1/18 (5.6)          |                   |                   |

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. Refers to comparison of proportions of unmarried and divorcing parties' demographic information.
RESULTS

Study participant demographics

See Tables 3 and 4 for more detailed demographic and relationship history information. Parents were, on average, 33 years old, white, mostly working, and had some college experience. Almost half of the parents noted that they did not have enough money to make ends meet at the end of the month. Parents, on average, shared 1.5 children and had been separated for 2.5 years. On average, parents noted low levels of interparental conflict. We compared unmarried and divorcing parents to examine demographic differences using chi squares and ANOVAs. We found that, relative to divorcing parents, unmarried parents were, on average, younger, had fewer years of education, had lived with the other parent for a shorter time, and were less likely to have a new partner.

Court website barriers

See Table 5 for the frequency with which each barrier was endorsed. The eight parents who did not access the court website (87.5% of whom were unmarried), after receiving a court order to do so, identified a variety of challenges. All parents interviewed (100%) reported that doing so would have been inconvenient in some way. The most commonly mentioned inconvenience was being too busy due to work and/or children. A few parents also stated that accessing the court website would have taken too long. For instance, one unmarried parent stated, “[I] take care of children and grandmother, and [I’m] working part time.”

The majority of the parents (75%) who did not access the website endorsed confusion and/or negative reactions to having to access the court website. Some parents indicated that they did not understand why they had been court ordered to access the court website or were not even aware that they had been. For instance, one unmarried parent noted, “[I] take care of children and grandmother, and [I’m] working part time.”

A few parents stated that they would have liked to have been notified about the court website in another manner; one unmarried parent stated, “[I]would have liked them to tell [me] in the court room not through written
Other parents reported that accessing the court website would not have been helpful, believing that a parenting program would not improve their parenting as they were already a good parent. For example, one unmarried parent stated, “We’re both good parents, and I don’t need someone telling me about how to raise my children.” Some parents believed that accessing the court website would have been upsetting. For example, an unmarried female parent said that accessing the court website would have been difficult “... because [the other parent (male)] threatened me.”

A few parents (37.5%) identified technology issues as barriers to accessing the court website. As an example, one unmarried parent discussed his struggle, saying, “If I had had WIFI, and known I was supposed to get on the website, I would have done it.”

Factors related to program participation

See Table 6 for themes endorsed by both those who did (N = 20) and did not (N = 38) complete the program.

Convenience

Almost all parents perceived the programs as convenient regardless of whether they completed it or not (89.7%), while fewer than half of parents reported that completing the program would be inconvenient in some way (31.0%). Most commonly, parents noted that the program was, or would have been, convenient due to the online nature of the program. Many noted that technology helped them access and participate in the parenting program and the majority of parents reporting that they possessed the technology required to participate in the program. One parent who completed the program stated, “...it was convenient because I had my computer at home,” while another parent who did not complete the program indicated that accessing the program would have been, “pretty convenient for me, I’ve always had a smart phone, and everyone in my family has a computer...”

However, among parents who viewed the programs as inconvenient, some noted issues with the length of the programs and finding the time to complete the programs within the context of their busy schedules. One parent reported, “I work full time and go to school full time and I have two daughters. I had to stay up late some nights to do it.” Another parent discussed program length issues, “3–5 h is too long. Realistically, someone is not likely to commit to that amount of time when they have kids, a job, homework, and housework. I just don’t have free weekends...somebody is not likely to commit to that length of time when they have other responsibilities.”

Technology problems

Some parents (13.2%) who did not complete the program disclosed that technology hindered their completion. A few parents noted confusion on how to access the program, or noted that they had technology issues that prevented them from logging into the program. For instance, one parent stated, “I couldn’t find the program”, while another reported “the program log-in did not work.”

| Code                                      | Total | Unmarried | Divorcing |
|-------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|-----------|
| Inconvenient                              | 8/8 (100.0%) | 7/7 (100.0%) | 1/1 (100.0%) |
| Negative Perception of Some Aspect of Website | 6/8 (75%) | 5/7 (71.4%) | 1/1 (100.0%) |
| Technology                                | 3/8 (37.5%) | 3/7 (42.9%) | 0/1 (0.0%) |
| Social/Personal Factor                    | 2/8 (25.0%) | 1/7 (14.3%) | 1/1 (100.0%) |
**Table 6** Proportions of parents endorsing themes

| Code                | Total N/N (%) | Unmarried N/N (%) | Divorcing N/N (%) | Chi Square comparing unmarried and divorcing parents | Completed program N/N (%) | Did not complete program N/N (%) | Chi Square comparing those who did and did not complete program |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Convenience         | 52/58 (89.7%) | 35/40 (87.5%)     | 17/18 (94.4%)     | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 0.65, p = .42$                      | 16/20 (80.0%)             | 36/38 (94.7%)                  | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 3.07, p = .08$                                       |
| Inconvenience       | 18/58 (31.0%) | 13/40 (32.5%)     | 5/18 (27.8%)      | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 0.13, p = .72$                      | 9/20 (45.0%)              | 9/38 (23.7%)                  | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 2.78, p = .10$                                       |
| Technology Problems | 15/58 (25.9%) | 13/40 (32.5%)     | 2/18 (11.1%)      | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 2.97, p = .09$                      | 10/20a (50.0%)**          | 5/38 (13.2%)**                | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 9.28, p = .002$                                     |
| Preferred Online Program | 35/58 (60.3%) | 22/40 (55.0%)     | 13/18 (72.2%)     | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 1.54, p = .22$                      | 14/20 (70.0%)             | 21/38 (55.3%)                 | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 1.19, p = .28$                                       |
| Court Factor Facilitator | 18/58 (31.1%) | 11/40 (27.5%)     | 7/18 (38.9%)      | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 0.75, p = .39$                      | 15/20 (75.0%)***          | 3/38 (7.9%)***                | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 27.57, p < .001                                    |
| Court Factor Barrier | 7/58 (12.1%)  | 7/40 (17.5%)      | 0/18 (0.0%)*      | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 4.92, p = .03$                      | 5/20 (25.0%)*             | 2/38 (5.3%)*                  | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 4.81, p = .03$                                       |
| Positive Perception | 45/58 (77.6%) | 29/40 (72.5%)     | 16/18 (88.9%)     | $X^2(1, N = 58) = .33, p = .57$                      | 20/20 (100%)**            | 35/38 (65.8%)**               | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 8.82, p = .003                                      |
| Negative Perception | 24/58 (41.3%) | 19/40 (47.5%)     | 5/18 (27.8%)      | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 1.99, p = .16$                      | 13/20 (65%)**             | 11/38b (29.0%)**             | $X^2(1, N = 58) = 7.02, p = .008                                      |

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

*aProportions of unmarried and divorcing parents differed within those who completed the program. See text for details.

*bProportions of unmarried and divorcing parents differed within those who did not complete the program. See text for details.
Significantly, half of the parents who participated in a program (50%) reported that they experienced a technological problem while completing the program. The most common problem reported by parents was difficulty accessing the program due to technological requirements; other parents reported confusion regarding how to navigate or access the program online. Importantly, among parents who completed the program, unmarried parents (72.7%) were more likely to report encountering technology issues than divorcing parents (22.2%; $X^2[1, N = 20] = 5.05, p = .03$). One unmarried parent who completed the program described, “There were some parts where I watched a video and answered questions, but after I answered the questions, it would say I didn’t watch the video, so then I had to re-watch several of the videos! I was confused because it says at the beginning that you can do it in any order, so I don’t know why I had to re-watch any videos.”

**Online versus In-Person**

When asked if parents preferred, or would have preferred, an online versus in-person parent program format, the majority (60.3%) reported that they preferred online. Reasons for preferring the online format included the increased level of privacy and limited need for social interaction. One parent who did not complete the program indicated her preference for an online course: “Just because since the town we live in is so small, I wouldn’t want to be in a room full of like people or women who I know, like discussing my personal matters.” A parent who completed the program said, “[In-person programs] would be more intrusive...” Among the minority of parents who reported a preference for an in-person class, many noted it was due to wanting some form of social support. For instance, one woman stated, “I learn from other people, so I would have liked to have that interaction from other people.”

**Court factors**

A majority of parents (75%) who completed the program stated that the court was one of the main reasons behind their decision to participate. One parent reported, “I was under the impression that it was required, a step in the process and could not continue the court programs (sic) without it.” Among parents who completed the program, unmarried parents were the only parents who endorsed participating in the program to look good for the judge. The findings were different for parents who did not complete the program, as such parents were less likely to report that the court played a role in their decision to not participate (7.9%). For example, one parent indicated, “I felt like I didn’t need to do it after my third child and it didn’t look like it was required by the court.”

However, a minority of both parents who did (25%) and did not (5.3%) compete the program noted factors about the court’s involvement (e.g., method of communicating about the program) that hindered their participation in the program. All parents who endorsed this theme were unmarried, with parents indicating that they would have preferred a different form of communication from the court regarding the program such as clearer presentation of information in the court order or details regarding the benefits of the program. One unmarried parent said, “I think they could have made [the court order] more clear about what [the program] is with something like a synopsis,” while another unmarried participant said, “I think that you should text more people.”

**Perceptions of the program**

We asked parents how they perceived the program and what they learned, or would have liked to learn. All parties (100%) who actually participated in a program viewed the program positively, felt the program

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Note that parties could have opted into text messages from the court regarding any issues, but few chose to do so. This may be because the court notified parties that the party would be responsible for any text charges, if their cell phone carrier-imposed charges for texting.
was helpful, and reported that they enjoyed the quizzes and videos. Some parents reported that they felt the program was clear and easy to follow, with one party indicating, “It was simple, everything was self-explanatory [and] I am very computer illiterate.” Other positives listed by one or more parents who participated in the program included that the program improved communication, improved co-parenting skills, improved parenting ability, or helped their child. In contrast, among parents who did not complete the program, fewer parents viewed the program positively (65.8%), but those who did view it positively reported that they thought the program would have been helpful had they completed it. These parents indicated that they would have liked to learn about improving their parenting, and this was particularly relevant among divorcing parents. For example, one divorcing father stated that he would have liked to “… get a better sense of how to better parent. I’m a good dad, but any other information would be helpful.”

Sixty-five percent (65%) of parents who actually participated in the programs disliked some aspect of the program. Among parents who did not complete the program, a significantly smaller percentage (29.0%) reported negative perceptions of the program. Importantly, among parents who did not complete the program, only unmarried parents reported negative perceptions, clearly differing from divorcing parent ($X^2[1, N = 38] = 4.81, p = .03$). Some of the unmarried parents who negatively perceived the program reported that they felt the program would not have been helpful, such as one individual who stated, “I know everything to take care of a child.”

**DISCUSSION**

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, courts are increasingly moving to online programming to protect public health. Online programs were designed to be more accessible to parents than traditional, in-person programs. However, we encountered problems with compliance among parents court-ordered to complete online parent programs within a RCT. Thus, the current study was designed to seek parent input on barriers to and facilitators of program participation. In addition, we explored differences between the unmarried and divorcing parents. While the interviews were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the results are even more salient because of the pandemic.

The majority of parents noted that the online programs were convenient, with most parents believing that they had the technology necessary to access and complete the program. These findings are consistent with previous research. Studies surveying accessibility of online parenting programs found that even among low-income or disadvantaged families, the majority of participants had smartphones and access to the internet for personal use (Mcgoron et al., 2018). However, a minority of parents noted that even though they had the technology to complete these programs, the programs were inconvenient because they could not find the time in their busy lives to devote to completing them. Furthermore, half of the parents who completed the programs encountered some form of technology problem. Importantly, unmarried parents were more likely to report technological problems than divorcing parents. Thus, even after unmarried parents overcame barriers to childcare and time, they experienced more technological challenges when trying to complete a program.

Unmarried parents tend to be significantly more economically disadvantaged than divorcing parents (McLanahan, 2011). Furthermore, unmarried parents experience significantly more challenges with parenting and co-parenting after separation, and their children have more psychosocial difficulties in comparison to families whose parents are divorcing (McLanahan, 2011). Therefore, unmarried parents may represent a group of parents who potentially could particularly benefit from parent programs.

However, our findings highlight the challenges that this group of parents may face when asked to complete such interventions from home. These families are more likely to be stressed, have multiple caregiver roles, and not have enough money to pay their bills at the end of the month (Edin & Reed, 2005; McLanahan, 2011). Thus, these parents may not have time at home to complete the online programming that may be beneficial to them. If we cannot overcome these challenges, our efforts to provide families in the family court system with targeted prevention and intervention may only further exacerbate disparities in health and mental health – parents with the greatest
access to resources will be able to access and complete these online programs, and the parents without will find it difficult to benefit.

Given parents’ preference for online education, and the movement in the field towards adoption of online versions of in-person programming, it is critical that we identify methods to overcome existing barriers to completing online parent programs. One of the most commonly identified barriers to program completion in the current study was inconvenience. Some researchers have addressed inconvenience of in-person programs by tailoring support to a parent’s need, whether by providing connections to other organizations, transportation, childcare, or access to food (Koerting et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2012). A study of educational services offered through Head Start randomly assigned parents to either receive childcare and transportation or to a control group not provided with either benefit. The group of parents provided childcare and transportation demonstrated a higher level of participation (Watterson, 2001). While online programs have reduced the barrier of transportation, our findings suggest that online programs have not solved the issues of childcare or lack of sufficient time to complete programs. Thus, we must design and implement innovative ways to overcome these barriers, such as providing engaging programming or suggested activities for children to complete while parents complete their programs, or reducing program content to shorter segments with shorter clips (e.g., 15 minutes or less) that can be completed in shorter periods of available parent time.

We also must devise methods to alleviate technological issues for parents completing online programs, especially among the most disadvantaged parents. One study of barriers to parent education found that many parents were comfortable navigating an online program, but some who were less familiar with technology relied on in-program prompts and online technology support (Robinson, 2018). The author of that study suggested that for parents with less technology familiarity, continued online support, in the form of informational pages or having technology navigation assistance available, may be necessary (Robinson, 2018). Such technology support, provided and integrated into an online program, would assist divorcing and separating parents in completing parenting programs.

Most parents seemed to prefer an online format because of the potential privacy afforded by the platform. However, those who preferred in-person programs noted their desire for social support during the stressful separation process. Researchers have incorporated social support into online programming in various ways. A systematic review of 75 studies of online parenting resources found that the majority of resources offered some form of parent socialization, most commonly through informational pages, as well as carefully designed group forums or online chat capabilities with privacy protections so that parents who desired additional social support could participate as they saw fit. Content analysis of online parent communication across the studies showed overall consistently high levels of parent satisfaction whenever online social support was offered (Nieuwboer et al., 2013). In one feasibility study investigating how online tools can be used to engage parents, an online version of a parenting program was administered to a sample of high-risk parents; the program included a social media network containing discussion boards, an avatar for parents, and a facilitator to respond to posts, answer questions, share work, and monitor the site. The majority of participants in this study reported feeling engaged by the social media platform (Love et al., 2016).

It is important to note that only some participants in our study desired more social support than was offered in the programs we tested. Thus, it is possible that if program developers include an optional form of online social support, such as a social media network or discussion board, participant engagement could increase by honoring the desires of both participants who want more social support and those who do not. It is also possible that, when resources are available to do so, offering parents a choice between an online program and an in-person program could increase engagement by allowing parents to select what best fits their needs for social support.

Another promising avenue to explore to increase parent engagement is court messaging. Many parents who completed the program reported doing so because they thought it was mandatory. Some parents, all unmarried, discussed their desire for clearer communication from the court regarding the online parenting program, indicating the crucial role the court plays for parents, especially unmarried parents, when deciding whether to participate in parent
education. Thus, court messaging may help to increase parental engagement. One researcher found that participants who received more information about a parenting resource via email were more likely to access the resource (Clarkson, 2014). Another research group found that parents who received multiple engagement methods, including reminder calls, a teacher endorsement of the program, and a program flyer, were more likely to attend a parenting program than those who just received a brochure with basic program information (i.e., program location and time; Winslow et al., 2016). Consistent with past research demonstrating the importance of strong judicial support for programs (Thoennes & Pearson, 1999), the current study findings suggest that if courts want parents to complete parenting programs, they may have to take additional actions beyond sending a court order. Further, unmarried parents may require (and benefit from) additional guidance from the court through the process, such as through clearer materials about a program or assistance from court staff when trying to complete a program (Insabella et al., 2003).

Finally, another area of potential exploration would be to consider the role of attorneys in facilitating participation in parenting education programs. As none of the participants in this study were represented by legal counsel, we do not know how the presence of attorneys might have been a facilitator or barrier to participation. As part of their duty to counsel their clients, parents’ attorneys can play a critical role in providing and encouraging parents to obtain education (Kelly & Kisthardt, 2009). Some research has indicated that parents of particularly young children often rely on their attorneys to provide guidance and support to navigate through the divorce process (Pruett & Jackson, 1999). Anecdotally, members of the research team have observed that attorneys play an important role in encouraging their clients to comply with local rules, which may include completing parenting programs. Further research is required to explore the role of attorneys and GALs in promoting program participation among parents.

Study limitations

The current study has several limitations. First, not all study eligible parents chose to participate in the current study, so our results may not be representative of all of the parents who were eligible for the RCT or who opened family cases in the study site court. Unfortunately, we are unable to compare the descriptive demographics of those who did and did not participate in this qualitative study, as we lack demographic data on those who did not. Similarly, our current study findings may not be generalizable to different court jurisdictions, which can vary across multiple factors, including type of parent program offered, resources available for program implementation, and existing statutory or judicial requirements for parenting programs.

The qualitative data collected in this study are parent self-reports. Although interviewers informed participants that no person in the court system would have access to their responses, results may have been impacted by parents’ mistaken belief that reviewing a program favorably would somehow benefit them in court. Due both to the fact that the qualitative study was not designed until the RCT was partially completed and to our qualitative study eligibility criteria (e.g., case must have had a court hearing), some participants were contacted months after they were assigned to complete an online parenting program. Thus, a participant may have forgotten details about the parenting program and their reasons for participating in it or not.

In addition, this study was conducted prior to the current pandemic. Thus, the experiences of study cases may have differed in important ways from those of family court cases during COVID-19 (e.g., study cases still had in-person court hearings). Some of those differences may impact party perception of online programs. As one example, while some parents in our study did not want social interaction with other parents in a parenting program, after months of being at home during a pandemic, parents might be more receptive to interacting with other parents, even if online. As another example, we suggested that perhaps providing children with activities to do while parents complete an online program could be useful, but during the pandemic, many children are tired of completing activities at home and many parents are tired of having to supervise such activities; thus, other more innovative methods of childcare need to be considered. Future research will be needed to either replicate or modify our findings regarding parent participation in online parent programs during and following the current pandemic.
Recommendations

In light of the current study findings, we provide the following recommendations for family courts and parent program developers:

- As the majority of parents who received the court order did not go on to access and complete the program, courts and program developers should consider incorporating intensive recruitment strategies such as providing information about program importance, relevance, and benefits. Considering that a majority of parents who completed the program did so because they perceived it to be mandatory, judges and court staff may want to discuss a program and its benefits with parents in person (once courts are able to convene in person) or by other means, such as phone or an online communication platform, or may want to send motivating reminders, such as by text, rather than only providing information on a written order. This may be of particular use for engaging unmarried parents who suggested such ideas.

- Some parents, particularly unmarried parents, may benefit from supplementary support such as additional time to complete the program. Thus, courts may want to consider discussing such needs with parents and providing relevant resources, in ways that are consistent with public health goals, when necessary.

- Program developers may want to design their programs with unmarried busy parents in mind. For example, it may be easier for parents to complete small segments of an intervention on their phone over time than it is to complete an entire four-hour program in one sitting. We note that both programs examined in this study did allow parents to complete the program across multiple sessions.

- As half of the parents who completed the program encountered some form of a technology problem, there is a clear need for technical support, such as dedicated IT personnel or a help line. Again, this may be of particular importance for unmarried parents.

- Though most parents, at least prior to the pandemic, enjoyed the privacy of the online programs, some parents noted wanting some form of social support as a part of the program. Thus, programs should offer some form of optional, privacy-protected online social support, such as online chat rooms or discussion boards.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that online parent programs have successfully decreased some barriers to attendance for some separating parents. However, online parenting programs still have room for improvement, especially for those in greatest need (i.e., unmarried parents of children). Unmarried parents may benefit most from such programs given their increased likelihood of experiencing risk factors that might make parenting more difficult (e.g., economic instability, parental mental health concerns, relationship instability; McLanahan, 2011). Thus, online parent programs in their current form may not be adequately serving this population and perhaps are even inadvertently creating a greater resource gap. As online programs continue to grow in popularity, particularly in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for physical distancing, it is important to provide all parents with sufficient access to online programming, potentially achieved through our recommendations above. Further systematic studies of methods to increase parent engagement are required to fully understand effective methods of making programs more accessible to separating parents.

While the interview responses in the current study provide ideas to increase program participation, it is critical to note that, to our knowledge, there are currently no online parent education programs for divorcing or separating parents with methodologically strong empirical evidence supporting their effectiveness. Thus, it is crucial that we determine if online parent programs are effective before investing heavily in ways to increase parent engagement in such programs. However, we hope that as researchers continue to design online programs for separating parents
(and assuming there are empirical studies of the effectiveness of online programs), they will design and implement online parenting programs that ultimately are found to improve outcomes for parents and children.

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**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

Claire Tomlinson is a fifth year Clinical Science graduate student at Indiana University. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology at University of Arizona, where she began studying families in the legal system, including children in the child welfare system. At Indiana University, Claire investigates the evaluation and implementation of evidence-based practice in the family law field, with a focus on divorcing and separating parents. She is interested in family law programs, often based in courts, that are designed to minimize the negative impact of parental separation on the children in the family. Her current projects include the evaluation of programs such as family mediation and online parent education for separating or divorcing parents.

Brittany N. Rudd, PhD is the Director of the Implementation Science and System-Involved Youth Research Program in the Institute for Juvenile Research, as well as a Clinical Instructor of Psychiatry and Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Dr. Rudd completed her doctoral training in clinical science at Indiana University, pre-doctoral clinical internship at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, and her postdoctoral training at the Penn Center for Mental Health at the University of Pennsylvania. Funded by NIH, NSF, and the Indiana Supreme Court, the central theme of Dr. Rudd’s program of research is improving access to quality mental health care among vulnerable populations. Dr. Rudd founded the Implementation Science and System-Involved Youth Research Program to improve the implementation of evidence-based policies and practices within systems that serve vulnerable youth, including those in the juvenile justice, child welfare, and family court service settings. She is currently engaging in research to increase the adoption and implementation of suicide prevention practices within the juvenile justice system and parent education programs within the family law system. The long-term goal of her research program is to transform non-traditional behavioral health settings (e.g., courts, juvenile justice) into hubs of evidence-based prevention and intervention to empower and improve outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable youth who may never access behavioral health services in traditional outpatient settings.

Applegate joined the faculty at the Indiana University Maurer School of Law in 2001, and currently teaches mediation theory and practice in the clinical law program that she developed at the Law School. Through this program, law students provide mediation services to indigent and low-income litigants in disputed custody, parenting-time, and other family law cases. Applegate has received teaching, research, and service awards for her work. She has been a leader in clinical legal education on the national level, and actively and significantly involved in state and local bar activities, with a special emphasis in the areas of delivery of pro bono services, training mediators, and mediation ethics. Applegate and colleagues have conducted research on family law issues, focusing on families experiencing parental divorce or separation. She and her colleagues have developed
and tested the best methods of screening for a history of IPV in cases seeking family mediation, so that mediators are aware of IPV and consider the possible impact of IPV on the mediation process. They also conduct randomized controlled trials testing the effectiveness of family law interventions, including different mediation approaches (for both families with and without histories of IPV) and online parent education programs. Applegate has co-authored many publications in her research areas. Additionally, she has presented individually, as well as with her collaborators, in presentations at state, national, and international conferences about her research and practice areas.

Dr. Diaz is an Associate Professor at Ball State University and the Director of Graduate Studies for the department of Psychological Science. She is a developmental psychologist with a background in infant and child behavioral and physiological development. Using various methodologies (e.g., EEG, ECG, Actigraphy, observations, and questionnaires), her research program focuses on the relation between emotional and cognitive processes and their role in social and academic competence throughout the lifespan. She is also interested in exploring how environmental (i.e., parenting, culture) and internal (i.e., resilience, motivations) factors may help better understand individual differences.

Holtzworth-Munroe is a Professor in Indiana University’s Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. She has conducted research on intimate partner violence (IPV) since the mid-1980s. Since 2006, in collaboration with others, Holtzworth-Munroe has conducted research on family law issues, focusing on families experiencing parental divorce or separation, including developing and testing IPV screening measures and conducting randomized controlled trials testing the effectiveness of family law interventions. She is a recipient of the Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research Award from the AFCC.

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