

Ensuring Access

Encouraging Support

Final Report

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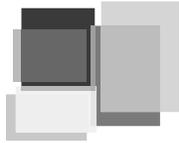
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Points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of OCSE or the OAG.



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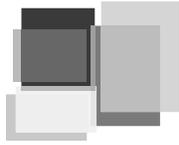
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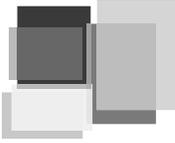
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Executive Summary

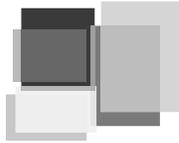
The Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project aimed to promote the payment of child support by offering noncustodial parents in Harris County a variety of services to resolve their access and visitation problems. It was conducted by the Attorney General of Texas (OAG) in collaboration with the Harris County Domestic Relations Office (DRO) to assist parents with child support cases to enforce their visitation orders by providing free services including attorney consultations, parent conferences and legal enforcement actions. During February 2005 to December 2006, 875 noncustodial parents with cases in local child support offices in Region 6 who disclosed that they had visitation problems were identified and randomly assigned to receive services by DRO staff (high-level treatment) or printed information on visitation (low-level treatment). The evaluation involved collecting information from multiple sources on noncustodial parents in both groups including telephone interviews six months following project enrollment and a review of automated child support records.

Key Outcome Findings

Parents in the high-level treatment group are significantly more likely to increase their payment of child support, with the most pronounced gains registered by those who participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences. The percent of child support due that was paid rose from 73 to 86 percent among noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group as compared with 75 to 78 percent for members of the low-level treatment group. Those who participated in attorney consultations and parent conferences made the greatest gains and payments rose from 73 to 88 percent. None of the increases were due to enforcement actions.

Noncustodial parents who participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences are significantly more likely to report improvements in their visitation situation. Nearly half (45%) of interviewed noncustodial parents who participated in DRO services reported that parent-child contact had improved, as compared with 15 percent of nonparticipants. Participants were also significantly more likely to report post-program visitation patterns that they characterized as “regular and scheduled” (40% versus 20%). They were much less likely to report that visitation “never” occurred (39% versus 62%).

Noncustodial parents who participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences are significantly more likely to report improvements in their relationships with the other parent. Parents who received services at the DRO were significantly more apt to report cooperative relationships with the other parent following program participation (48% versus 29%). They were significantly more likely to report that their relationships had improved (29%



versus 15%), less likely to say that they had become worse (28% versus 51%), and more likely to give the program credit for the relationship changes they had experienced (53% versus 27%).

Key Service Findings

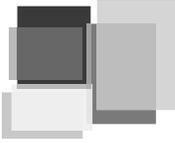
It is difficult to deliver remedial services to noncustodial parents who say that they have problems with visitation. A significant proportion of noncustodial parents failed to follow through with their request for help, and ultimately, 60 percent met with a DRO attorney while 40 percent did not. Even though all members of the high-level treatment group were scheduled for an attorney consultation, 52 percent said that they did not know about it.

Parents who participate in consultations with DRO attorneys are very satisfied with the experience. Parents who met with attorneys recalled discussing a variety of issues, the chief ones being the problems they were having with visitation, what their visitation order said and meant, and how the visitation enforcement process works. Those who met with DRO attorneys were either very (46%) or somewhat (31%) satisfied with the experience.

Parents who participate in parent conferences at the DRO are able to produce agreements and are very satisfied with the experience. Three-quarters of interviewed noncustodial parents that participated in a parent conference reported reaching an agreement with the other parent. Whether or not they reached an agreement, nearly half said they were “very satisfied” and another 21 percent saying that they were “somewhat satisfied” with the experience.

Although legal enforcement procedures are rarely used, they are important components of the service menu. Only six parents wound up filing motions in court to enforce their visitation orders. Nearly all cases were settled prior to filing in court, with some parents reporting that the mere threat of enrolling in the project had solved the problem. Still other cases were dropped from the litigation track for failure to generate the necessary documentation.

Although many parents value printed information, they are more apt to find it helpful if they get some in-person assistance, too. While 69 percent of low-treatment group members found printed information alone at least somewhat helpful, the high-level treatment group was significantly more apt to report that it was “very helpful” (42% versus 30%).



Key Findings on Referral and Enrollment

Noncustodial parents are skeptical of an offer of help with visitation from the child support agency. Mass mailings to noncustodial parents with young children that included an offer for free services to address visitation problems yielded response rates of only 1 to 2 percent. It was more effective for child support workers to flag parents with problems when they called or visited the agency and most of the 875 enrollments were generated from face-to-face referrals.

Child support workers exercise discretion in the types of noncustodial parents they refer for visitation services and eliminate cases with new child support orders and those that involve pending legal action. On average, parents referred to the project had child support orders that were at least 40 months old, only 10 percent had newer cases with orders of six months or less, and less than 1 percent had experienced a court contempt or driver's license suspension during the 18 months prior to their enrollment in the project.

Key Findings on Participants

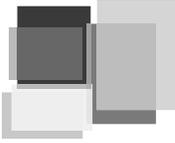
A wide variety of parents disclose visitation problems and enroll in a project offering remedial services. Three-quarters of project participants had never been married to the other parent.

Many parents with visitation problems who seek remedial services are involved with the criminal justice system and/or report domestic violence. Criminal justice records for Harris County revealed that 56 percent of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group had been arrested in Harris County, and half of custodial parents interviewed by DRO staff disclosed being hit, slapped, or kicked by the other parent.

Noncustodial parents report a variety of long-standing and entrenched problems with visitation. Noncustodial parents reported having a number of problems with visitation that had been going on for an average of 24 months. They included not being allowed to see the children, disagreements about what the visitation order says and not knowing where the children live.

Conclusions

The Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project illustrates that child support agencies realize measurable payment benefits when they provide remedial services to noncustodial parents with visitation problems. Compared with responsible fatherhood and employment programs



sponsored by the child support agency, parents served in Ensuring Access—Encouraging Support tended to be somewhat better educated, employed, and pay their support at better than average rates. The project services triggered even better child support payments from obligors who were already decent payers.

Like other child support remedies, these interventions work with a segment of the child support caseload and fall short of being a panacea for all. Like other child support remedies, they also require resources. The federal government should recognize this and treat interventions to address visitation problems as it does other child support expenditures. Minimally, this requires allowing referral and service activities dealing with visitation to qualify for federal reimbursement. Once identification of visitation problems and referral for services become normal agency practice, many ambiguities and hesitations will be resolved. Then it will be possible to train child support workers to identify noncustodial parents with visitation problems and to make appropriate referrals without fear of violating program rules or impeding case processing.

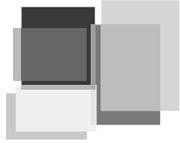
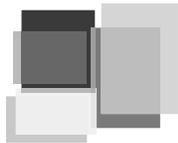


Table of Contents

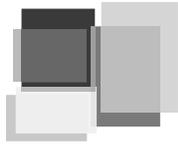
I. Introduction	1
II. Project Procedures	5
III. Methods	10
IV. Project Enrollment	13
V. Project Participants, Children and Relationships	18
Profile of Parents Enrolled in the Project	18
Children and Parent-Child Contact Patterns	22
Parental Relationships	24
VI. Access and Visitation Problems	28
VII. Project Services	32
Project Attrition	32
Attorney Consultations	37
Parent Conferences	39
Litigation	43
VIII. Parent Reactions to Project Services	46
Characteristics of Respondents in the Follow-Up Interview	46
Parent Reactions to Various Services Designed to Help with Access and Visitation	48
IX. Outcomes According to Project Participants	61
Changes in Parent-Child Contact	61
Changes in Parent Relationships	63
Changes in Child Support Payment Patterns: Parent Report	65
X. Project Outcomes Based on Objective Records	67
Changes in Child Support Payment Patterns: Child Support Records	67
XI. Summary and Conclusions	75
Key Findings	77
Outcomes	85
Conclusions	87

References



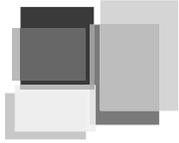
List of Tables

Table 1. Selected Demographic and Child Support Characteristics of Harris County, Texas	6
Table 2. Project Enrollment and Group Assignment	13
Table 3. Selected Child Support Case Characteristics at Project Enrollment, by Treatment Group	16
Table 4. Selected Demographic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in High- and Low-Treatment Groups	19
Table 5. Selected Demographic Characteristics of High- and Low-Treatment Custodial Parents	20
Table 6. Comparison of Selected Demographic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in Responsible Fatherhood, Employment, and Visitation Projects	21
Table 7. Selected Information on Children in Cases in High- and Low-Treatment Groups	23
Table 8. Characteristics of NCP and CP Relationship Based on Reports by the NCP, by Group	25
Table 9 NCP Report of Relationship with CP by Marital and Cohabitation Status in High- Level Treatment Group Cases	26
Table 10. Assessments of Relationships between the NCP and CP Based On Reports by the CP in High Treatment Group Cases	26
Table 11. Reports of Domestic Violence by CPs and NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group	27
Table 12. Criminal History and Restrictions on Visitation for NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group	27
Table 13. Nature of the Access and Visitation Problem and its Duration Reported by NCPs, by Group	29
Table 14. Duration of Access and Visitation Problems and Frequency of NCP Visits Based on CP Report for Cases in High-Level Treatment Group	30



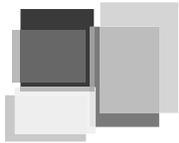
List of Tables Continued

Table 15. Project Services Used by NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group ...	32
Table 16. Selected Characteristics of NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group Who Did and Did Not Receive Services	33
Table 17. Comparison of Parental Relationships and Access and Visitation Problems Reported by NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group Who Received Services with Those Who Failed to Follow Through and Did Not Receive Services.....	34
Table 18. Factors Associated with Appearance or Failure to Appear for the Attorney Consultation	35
Table 19. Selected Demographic Characteristics of NCPs in High-Level Treatment Group With an Attorney Consultation Versus Those with a Consultation and a Parent Conference	36
Table 20. Problems Paying Child Support Reported by NCPs During Consultations with DRO Attorneys	38
Table 21. Summary of Facts, DRO Actions, and Outcomes in Litigated Cases ...	44
Table 22. Selected Characteristics of Parents Interviewed, by Treatment Group	46
Table 23. Relationships with the Other Parent and the Children Reported by Interviewed Noncustodial Parents, by Group	47
Table 24. How Interviewed Noncustodial Parents Heard About the Project and the Domestic Relations Office, by Group	47
Table 25. Responses of Noncustodial Parents to Mailed or In-Person Information on Access and Visitation, by Group.....	48
Table 26. Actions Taken by Noncustodial Parents and Their Perceived Helpfulness Based on Printed Information about AV Resources, by Group	49
Table 27. Perceived Reactions of Custodial Parents to the News that Noncustodial Parents were Getting Help From Domestic Relations Office, by Group	50



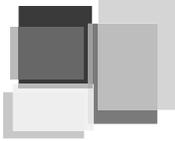
List of Tables Continued

Table 28. Parent Reactions to Internet-Based Communications About Visitation, by Group	50
Table 29. Parent Reactions to Opportunity to Attend Parent Education Class, by Group	52
Table 30. Reactions of Noncustodial Parents to Opportunity to Meet with DRO Attorneys	53
Table 31. Topics Discussed in Attorney Consultation and Their Helpfulness, as Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group	53
Table 32. Overall Satisfaction With Attorney Consultation	54
Table 33. Participation in the Parent Conference Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group	54
Table 34. Description of Parent Conferences and Outcomes for Participants in the High-Level Treatment Group	55
Table 35. Topics Discussed in Parent Conference and Their Helpfulness, As Reported By Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group	56
Table 36. Outcomes Reported by Noncustodial Parents Who Go To Court, by Group	57
Table 37. Other Access and Visitation Services Parents Received, by Group	59
Table 38. Changes in Parent-Child Contact Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group	61
Table 39. Changes in Parent-Child Contact Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services	63
Table 40. Changes in Parental Relationships Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group	64



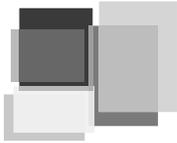
List of Tables Continued

Table 41. Changes in Parental Relationships Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services.....	64
Table 42. Changes in Payment of Child Support Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group	65
Table 43. Changes in Child Support Payments Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services.....	66
Table 44. Information on the Child Support Order for the Target Case Held by Noncustodial Parents at Project Enrollment, by Group.....	68
Table 45. Child Support Due and Paid in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment in the Target Case, by Group	69
Table 46. Source of Child Support Payments Made by Noncustodial Parents and Enforcement Actions in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment in the Target Case, by Group	71
Table 47. Child Support Due and Paid in the Target Case in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment for Parents in High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services.....	71
Table 48. Information on the Second Child Support Case for Noncustodial Parents With Two or More Cases, by Group.....	73
Table 49. Child Support Due and Paid on the Second Child Support Case in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment, by Group	73
Table 50. Numbers of Project Participants with Information Collected at Different Stages of the Data Collection Process.....	77



List of Figures

Figure 1. Enrollment Patterns for High- and Low-Treatment Groups, by Month of Project Enrollment	13
Figure 2. How Often NCP Reports Seeing the Child in the Six Months Prior to Project Enrollment	24
Figure 3. Comparison of Access and Visitation Problems Reported by NCPs and CPs in the High Treatment Group	31
Figure 4. Type of Visitation Order in Place at Consultation with DRO Attorney for NCPs in the High- Level Treatment Group	37
Figure 5. Issues Discussed During Consultation with DRO Attorney for in the High-Treatment Group	38
Figure 6. Action Recommended by DRO Attorney During Consultation with NCPs in High- Level Treatment Group	39
Figure 7. Issues Discussed During Parent Conferences at the DRO	40
Figure 8. Rating of Parents' Relationship by Facilitator of Parent Conference	41
Figure 9. Ratings of Parents' Efforts to Solve the Visitation Problems by DRO Facilitator of Parent Conferences	41
Figure 10. Topics Addressed in Agreements Produced in Parent Conferences ...	42
Figure 11. How the Agreement Reached in Parent Conference Compares to Court Order	43



I. Introduction

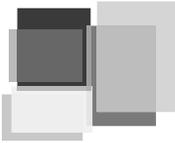
The Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project was conducted by the Attorney General of Texas (OAG) in collaboration with the Harris County Domestic Relations Office (DRO). The goal of the project was to promote the payment of child support by offering noncustodial parents in Harris County a variety of services aimed at resolving their access and visitation problems and promoting parent-child contact. Many noncustodial parents have problems getting to see their children, and these issues are frequently mentioned reasons for nonpayment of support. By offering parents a variety of materials and free services aimed at addressing access problems and enforcing visitation orders, the OAG hoped to eliminate these problems as causes of nonpayment and increase payments.

Since the inception of the child support program in 1975, access and visitation and child support have been legally distinct and the child support program has lacked the authority to enforce visitation orders. Nevertheless, practitioners and researchers have long concluded that confusion about visitation orders and denial of access are common problems in child support cases (Pearson and Anhalt, 1993; Seltzer, 1991). Although researchers have been unable to determine the causal chain, there is little doubt that visitation and child support are related. Non-resident parents with little or no contact with their children pay little support, while those with regular contact tend to pay regularly. According to the U.S. Census, 77.1 percent of parents with joint custody or visitation rights paid at least some child support, compared with 55 percent of their counterparts without visitation rights or joint custody (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2003).

Many have urged child support agencies to develop ways of addressing these issues, and Texas has gone further than most states to do so. The Texas Family Code encourages frequent contact between the child and each parent, and the Standard Possession Order is presumptive (Tex. Fam. Code Ann. §153.251(b)). Under the Standard Possession Order, a noncustodial parent has possession of the child(ren) over three years of age on the first, third, and fifth weekend of the month and on Thursdays during the school year for two hours or overnight. The noncustodial parent gets half of certain holidays, and 30 days during the summer. The parties may mutually agree to vary the possession of a child, and the specific terms set out in the standard order take effect only failing such mutual agreement.

Many parents, however, do not understand standard possession orders and their visitation rights. Nor are they able to enforce them. The OAG has taken several steps to help parents with access and visitation problems.

- **Access and Visitation Hotline:** In March 2003, the OAG awarded Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas (LANWT) a contract to establish a hotline to respond to questions about

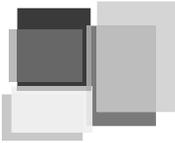


custody and visitation. Funded by the federal Access and Visitation Grant Program, the hotline currently provides five-day-per week, three-hour-per-day, statewide telephone access to attorneys for callers seeking help with a variety of family law problems. Since its inception in March 2003, the hotline averages between 30 and 40 telephone calls each day (10,000 per year), most of which are referred by OAG staff. To avoid potential conflicts with other LANWT cases, however, all information must be provided to callers in a non-fact-specific and anonymous fashion (Center for Policy Research, 2004).

- **Access and Visitation Website:** With support from the OAG, LANWT also created a website (TXAccess.org) that offers legal information, answers to frequently asked questions, information on how to find a lawyer, and legal forms and documents. Among the downloadable legal and nonlegal forms available in Spanish and English is a Motion for Mediation, a Demand Letter for Visitation, and a Visitation Journal. Individuals can use these materials for *pro se* filings and for additional advice and information on a broad range of family law topics.
- **Access and Visitation Grants:** The OAG supports a broad range of community, faith-based, and county programs with the \$621,000 it receives annually from the federal Access and Visitation Grant Program. These agencies provide supervised visitation, parent education, and neutral drop-off services to parents with child support cases.
- **Online Directory of Access and Visitation Services:** The OAG compiled a directory of 40 providers of access and visitation services that can be accessed on the OAG website and is readily accessible to child support staff, parents, counselors, and others. The listing may be searched by zip code, county, and service provided. It includes a wide range of services to promote shared parenting, including mediation, facilitation, parenting plan development, and visitation enforcement (Stuckey, 2006).

Despite these developments, many parents continue to struggle with access and visitation. For example, detailed telephone interviews with 132 hotline callers revealed that most hotline callers wanted more specific advice, legal help, and less referral activity. The evaluation also showed that most hotline callers have extremely low levels of education and household income, characteristics that call into question their ability to independently use the Access and Visitation Website and pursue *pro se* filings and legal actions (Center for Policy Research, 2004).

Child support workers also struggle to find allowable ways to respond to access and visitation issues. Surveys of child support workers reveal that visitation complaints are common, the most typical being that the custodial parent does not allow the nonresident parent to visit. In response, child support workers report that they usually tell parents that child support and visitation are two separate issues (64%), suggest that they contact an attorney (64%), and explain that there is



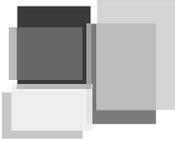
nothing the child support agency can do about visitation (64%) (Center for Policy Research, 2006).

While these responses are understandably frustrating to clients, they also appear to be unsatisfactory to many child support workers. Most surveyed workers think that helping with access and visitation issues will show noncustodial parents that the agency cares about children (76%) and is not biased (73%). Many think that collections would improve (66%). Asked what actions they would be willing to take with parents who disclose access and visitation problems, 92 percent indicated that they would be willing to refer parents to community services and 64 percent said that they would like to refer parents to a specialized worker in the child support agency (Center for Policy Research, 2006).

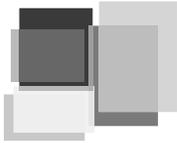
When the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) released a grant announcement seeking proposals to explore ways to integrate access and visitation services with regular child support activities for those with an explicit complaint related to child access, the OAG decided to respond. In September 2004, it received funds to experiment with referring parents in the child support system to the Harris County Domestic Relations Office for interventions aimed at addressing problems with visitation and to monitor whether such efforts result in increased child support payments. Domestic Relations Offices have been created in ten, mostly urban counties to serve constituents and the local courts through a variety of services including investigation, mediation, coordination, and enforcement. Parents in nonpublic assistance cases with orders promulgated in one of nine family district courts and four child support courts in Harris County may apply to have the DRO pursue court interventions aimed at enforcing the visitation and child support terms of their orders on a fee-for-service basis. For this project, the Harris County DRO agreed to provide parents in child support cases (including those on public assistance) a variety of services aimed at enforcing their visitation orders at no charge to the parties. This included attorney consultations, parent conferences, and legal enforcement services.

This report presents findings for the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project. Like OCSE, the Texas OAG was interested in generating answers to a host of questions about how child support agencies can address access and visitation issues in its caseload and the impact of such activities on payments. They include the following:

- What types of parents in the child support caseload have AV problems?
- What types of AV problems do they have?
- At what stage of case processing do they surface and get detected?
- What types of interventions by what types of personnel work best?



- What are the biggest barriers to resolving AV problems?
- What is the workload impact of addressing AV problems for child support agencies and the court?
- What is the impact of addressing AV problems on child support payments?
- What is the impact on parent-child contact patterns?



II. Project Procedures

Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support was conducted in Harris County, Texas. The operational phase ran from February 2005 to December 2006. Procedures were developed to achieve the following objectives:

- Generate two groups of families with open child support cases with parenting-time problems;
- Provide high and lower-level treatments to each group, respectively; and
- Monitor the impact of the interventions on clients, including the payment of child support.

Project Setting: The project was conducted in Region 6 of the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG). Ultimately, this involved seven local child support offices: 602, 604, 607, 608, 609, 610, and 612.

Table 1 presents selected demographic information about Harris County. The table shows that Harris County has a population of 3.6 million people. Nearly one-fifth of Harris County residents are African-American, 38 percent are Hispanic and another 38 percent are non-Hispanic whites. Nearly a quarter have less than a high school diploma; half have household incomes below \$44,002. Nearly half (42.8%) of all families with a female head of household and children under the age of 18 had incomes below the poverty level, and in 2005, the unemployment rate was 8.1 percent.

Table 1 also presents selected information on child support in Harris County. The Table shows that Region 6 had 149,780 open child support cases, of which 12.9 percent involved the current receipt of public assistance and 18.1 percent involved only a medical support order. Annual collections for 2006 stood at \$342,195,855. A total of 80.3 percent of open cases had child support orders and the percent of current support due that was actually collected was 61.7 percent. In 2005, Region 6 had approximately 9,011 new cases. In 2006, the number of new cases was 8,537.

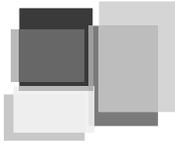
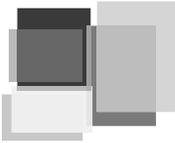


Table 1. Selected Demographic and Child Support Characteristics of Harris County, Texas

Population Size & Growth	Total Population 2005 estimate	3,647,656
Age	Population under age 18	1,063,462 (29.15%)
	Median age	32.5 years
Race ¹	White	38%
	African American	18%
	Hispanic	38%
	Other	7%
Education (25 years or older)	Less than high school diploma	24%
	High school graduate or higher	76%
	Percent with bachelor's degree or higher	27%
Income	Median household income in 2005	\$44,002
	Median family income	\$50,180
Poverty Status	Percent of all families with children under 18	21%
	Percent of all families with a female householder and children under 18	43%
Unemployment Rate	February 2005	8.1%
Number of open child support cases		149,789
Percent of open child support cases on current public assistance		12.9%
Annual collections	2006	\$342,195,855
Percent of open cases with child support orders		70.3%
Percent of open cases with medical support order only		18.1%
Percent of current support due that was actually collected		61.7%
Number of new orders established	2005	9,011
	2006	8,537

Project Partners: To address visitation problems that surfaced in child support settings, the OAG contracted with the Harris County Domestic Relations Office (DRO), which traditionally has provided mediation and legal services to enforce the visitation and child support terms of Harris County orders for parents on a fee-for-service basis. The DRO was retained to provide case coordination and facilitated parent conferences — including a consultation with an attorney — to the largely unmarried population in the child support caseload. The DRO also contracted with the Escape Family Resource Center to provide a four-hour training program for parents dealing with communication, conflict, and co-parenting, as well as more extensive classes for

¹ Of those reporting one race only, unless otherwise stated.



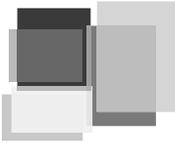
high-conflict families on how to conduct access safely and without trauma for children. Finally, the OAG collaborated with KidsnCommon, which offered separated and divorced parents with the necessary technology to utilize an Internet-based method of communicating with one another about their children.

Recruitment: Project architects experimented with a variety of techniques to identify suitable cases. During the startup phase of the project (February through May 2005), the focus was on attracting nonpaying obligors with the hope of inducing them to become compliant by addressing any visitation problems they might have. To accomplish this, the OAG generated lists of cases in Region 6 that met the following criteria: (1) one or more minor children aged 10 or younger; (2) the custodial parent (CP) and noncustodial parent (NCP) both reside within Harris County or in a nearby county; (3) domestic violence has not been alleged; and (4) payment had not been made in 180 days, or (effective May 2005) payments had not been made in full. Targeted noncustodial parents were mailed a letter that acknowledged that many parents with payment problems also have visitation problems. They were invited to telephone if they were interested in receiving help with visitation.

Mailings yielded extremely small numbers of telephone calls from noncustodial parents. As a result, the mailings were phased out in favor of in-person recruitment efforts. In May 2005, project staff began inviting noncustodial parents to participate in the project through outreach by child support personnel. Meetings were held with managers of the seven participating OAG offices to explain the objectives of the project and referral procedures were developed. Managers, in turn, discussed the project with their office staff. It was agreed that while child support staff would not routinely question clients about potential access and visitation problems, they would “listen” for these issues to be raised, and refer appropriate clients to the project.

Every child support office marketed the program somewhat differently. In some offices, customer service staff identified customers who phoned with visitation problems and instructed them to come to the office to complete a referral form. Others prepared fliers directing parents who were having problems visiting with their children to ask the receptionist for a referral form. Still other offices relied on attorneys and child support staff who met with clients to identify those who indicated that they had problems.

Clients who revealed that they had visitation issues and were interested in obtaining assistance completed a brief referral form that was faxed to the DRO. Alternatively, when they disclosed their problems, they were told to phone the DRO and the receptionist completed the brief referral form with them over the telephone. For the purposes of this study, recruitment stopped at the end of December 2006, and the analysis was conducted with all cases generated during the months between March 2005 and December 2006.



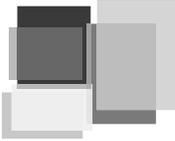
Group Assignment and Treatment: All referred parents were assigned to one of two treatment groups based on the last digit of their Social Security numbers. Noncustodial parents in both groups were contacted by telephone and assessed by staff at the DRO to gather additional information about their family situation and their disputes about access and visitation. Custodial parents in the high-level treatment group were also contacted by DRO staff in order to conduct an assessment.

Those in the low-level treatment group were sent a resource package. It included:

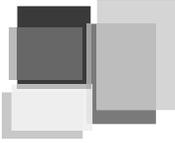
- A voucher to attend the “Parents Forever” class at Escape Family Resource;
- A flier offering a free, one year-subscription to the KidsnCommon website;
- A sample letter to the custodial parent about exercising possession;
- Contact information for legal agencies and community organizations to aid with visitation issues;
- A Bill of Rights of Children of Divorce; and
- Referral to the Access and Visitation Hotline and the website provided by Legal Aid of Northwest Texas.

Parents assigned to the high-level treatment group were offered the following services:

- A free consultation with a DRO attorney to determine whether the case was appropriate for services; review and explain the visitation order, and describe the litigation process and the actions needed prior to attempting to enforce visitation through the court; collect relevant case facts; and promote the parent conference;
- A voucher to attend the “Parents Forever” class at Escape Family Resource, as well as additional classes on parenting for high-conflict couples;
- A flier offering a free, one-year subscription to the KidsnCommon website;
- A free conference with both parents conducted by a certified mediator and custody/visitation evaluator to review the order and attempt to produce an agreement that improved parent communication and/or resolved compliance problems;
- A second parent conference to assess how well agreements reached in the first session were working and to attempt to reach additional agreements, further clarify the visitation order, and/or work on parent communication; and



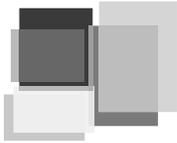
- Litigation undertaken by DRO attorneys in eligible cases. Criteria for litigation included cases where the final order had been granted by a Harris County court, the parents had participated in an unsuccessful parent conference, or no conference had been held but the custodial parent had been contacted and there were three documented episodes of visitation denial. To maximize the chances for success in litigation, noncustodial parents were told that it was preferable for them to be current in their child support and making additional payments to reduce their arrears balances.



Ensuring Access

Encouraging Support

Final Report

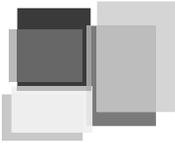


III. Methods

The evaluation of the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project conducted by the Center for Policy Research involved both qualitative and quantitative components.

Instrumentation: CPR designed a variety of data collection forms that were used with the high and low-level treatment groups.

- **NCP Intake and Assessment by DRO Staff:** This two-page form was completed by DRO staff based on telephone interviews with NCPs who wanted help with access and visitation. The form included information on the nature of the visitation problem, the number of children involved and their ages, the marital status of the parents, and the distance between the homes of the NCP and the children. The form also collected demographic information on the NCP: education, employment, income, race, and ethnicity. Finally, the form recorded contact information for the NCP. It was completed for cases in the high- and low-level treatment group.
- **CP Assessment by DRO Staff:** The assessment for custodial parents mirrored the assessment for noncustodial parents and elicited information on the marital status of the parents, the children they have in common, perceived problems with visitation, demographics, and domestic violence. This form was completed by DRO staff based on telephone interviews with CPs for cases in the high-level treatment group.
- **Investigator Form:** This form records the results of criminal justice and court database checks conducted by the DRO investigator. The major objective of these database searches was to identify domestic violence, child abuse problems, and criminal activities that would preclude or alter the delivery of access and visitation services. For all cases in the high-level treatment group, Harris County records were searched for arrests and convictions and evidence of a current or past restraining order and/or child abuse filing.
- **Attorney Consultation Form:** This form was completed by a DRO attorney following a meeting with NCPs in the high-level treatment group. It recorded more detail on the visitation problem; the status of child support payments, including the reasons for non-payment; and the topics discussed in the consultation.
- **Parent Conference Form:** This form was completed by the DRO staff member that conducted the parent conference with parents in the high-level treatment group. The form indicated whether the session was conducted jointly with both parents or separately; the topics that were discussed; levels of parent hostility and cooperation; and the result of the session, including the nature of agreements reached and how they compared with the court



order. The form concluded with future needed actions and referrals. If a second parent conference was held, the content and outcome of that session was also noted.

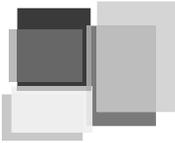
- **Immediate Case Outcome Form:** This form was completed by DRO personnel for all cases in both the high- and low-level treatment group. It indicated whether the case was appropriate for high- and low-level treatment, and the ultimate disposition, including the conduct of a parent conference and the development of an agreement. The outcome form also elicited information on the incidence and reasons for case exclusion.

- **Follow-up Telephone Questionnaire:** Professional telephone interviewers administered a close-ended, fixed-choice questionnaire to custodial and noncustodial parents in the low- and high-level treatment group. Telephone interview attempts were begun with all parents six months after project intake. Respondents were asked about the major types of assistance that they might have received and their utility, including mailed information on access and visitation, an attorney consultation, a parent conference, a parent education class, going to court, the use of other services such as supervised visitation, supervised drop-off and pick-up services, private attorneys, and legal aid. Respondents were also asked to assess the frequency of parent-child contact before and after project participation, changes in the relationship with the other parent since project participation, and changes in child support payment. Finally, respondents were asked a few demographic questions.

- **Child Support Data Collection Form:** In January 2007, programmers at the OAG generated an extract of selected information on all cases in the high- and low-level treatment groups. The information was drawn from the automated child support system, TXCSES. The extract included information on the status of the case at project entry, order dates, and order amounts. The extract also included information on arrears balances, other child support cases involving the noncustodial parent, and his arrears balance for all open cases. To determine whether project participation led to a change in child support payment behavior, monthly payment information was collected for each noncustodial parent for up to 18 months prior to and following project enrollment. Finally, the extract noted evidence of major enforcement actions being taken prior to and following project enrollment and key payment sources.

Data Collection: All forms that were completed by participants and/or DRO personnel were conveyed to the Center for Policy Research (CPR) for data entry and analysis. CPR staff worked closely with DRO staff to ensure that the data forms were completed accurately and in their entirety.

The six-month follow-up interview was conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory (POL) of Northern Illinois University, using its computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system. POL has a long track record conducting telephone surveys with child support populations. For



example, it conducted telephone surveys with 125 custodial and noncustodial parents in a five-state study of State Access and Visitation Grants sponsored by the OIG (OIG, 2002). POL also conducted telephone surveys with 970 custodial and noncustodial parents who used State Access and Visitation Grants to resolve their visitation problems, in a study funded by OCSE and conducted by the Center for Policy Research (2004).

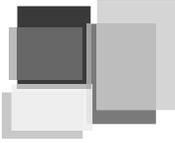
POL programmed the questionnaire on its CATI system with all appropriate skips for its administration to noncustodial parents in high- and low-level treatment groups, respectively. All respondents received a \$20 gift certificate from McDonald's or an Exxon gas card. Those who could not be reached by telephone were sent a postcard that reminded them of the \$20 incentive and invited them to phone POL using a toll-free number.

Interviewers made up to eight attempts to contact targeted program participants and conduct the 22-minute telephone interview. POL attempted to conduct interviews with 662 individuals and completed interviews with 286. This represents a response rate of 43 percent. The refusal rate was 3 percent. As in past studies of parents in the child support system, there were many phone disconnections and wrong number (21%) and unanswered telephones (31%).

Qualitative Information: Many questions about the utility of incorporating access and visitation services in a child support agency, and the best method for achieving service integration, could only be answered using qualitative techniques. Accordingly, CPR researchers conducted focus groups with line staff and administrators of the DRO and the child support agency.

Analysis: The analysis of the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project involved merging the information obtained from various data sources. The number of project cases was tabulated along with the number excluded for various reasons and the number that received services. The characteristics of parents with access and visitation problems were presented along with the nature of their problems. We assessed the delivery of project services; client attrition; and the nature of services that were delivered, including mailed information, a consultation with a lawyer, and a facilitated parent conference. The outcome analysis focused on perceived and actual changes in child support payments. It also considered changes in parent-child contact patterns and parental relationships following project enrollment.

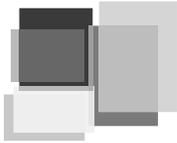
The next section of this report presents information on the number of parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups, their demographic characteristics, and the visitation problems that brought them into the project.



Ensuring Access

Encouraging Support

Final Report



IV. Project Enrollment

DRO staff enrolled a total of 875 noncustodial parents in the project during the recruitment process, which began in March 2005 and ended in December 2006. Just over one-quarter (26%) were assigned to the low-level treatment group. The remaining 646 cases were assigned to the high-level treatment group. Group assignment was done on a quasi-random basis. Noncustodial parents with Social Security Numbers ending in 0 to 2 were assigned to the low-level treatment group, while those with numbers ending in 3 to 9 were put in the high-level treatment group.

Table 2. Project Enrollment and Group Assignment

Low- level treatment group	26% (229)
High- level treatment group	74% (646)
Total enrollment	875

Figure 1 presents rates of enrollment during April 2005 to December 2006, when most parents entered the project. As previously noted, recruitment was slow during the first few months when the OAG mailed letters to delinquent NCPs inviting them to telephone the DRO if they were interested in receiving help with any visitation problem. Accordingly, during months one to seven, the average number of noncustodial parents that enrolled in the high-level treatment group was 16.4.

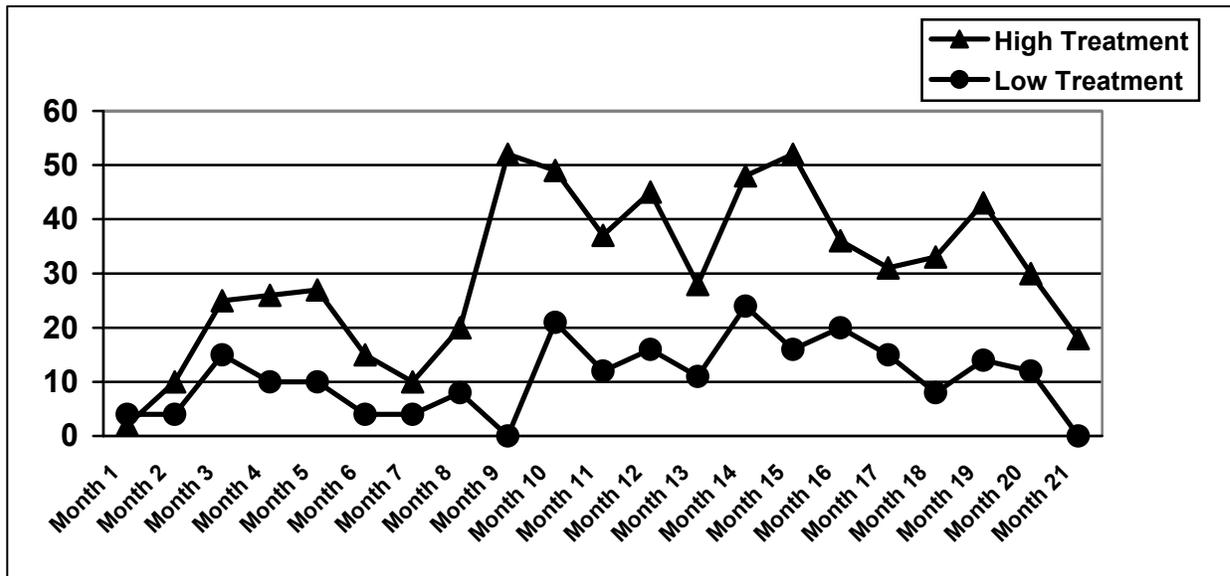
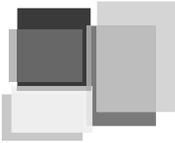


Figure 1. Enrollment Patterns for High- and Low-Treatment Groups, by Month of Project Enrollment



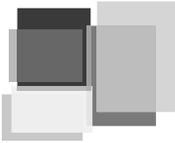
Referrals picked up when mail techniques were dropped and child support workers began referring clients to the DRO for services if they disclosed visitation problems. The average number of parents that enrolled in the high-level treatment group during the middle and late stages of the project were 39.9 during months 8 to 14 and 34.7 during months 15 to 21. They wound down after month 19.

Recruitment proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. The initial plan involved mass mailings to delinquent obligors. For example, OAG programmers identified more than 13,000 cases where child support payments had not been made for between 90 days and two years. They all had noncustodial and custodial parents with verified Harris County addresses and a child under age 10. None contained evidence of domestic violence. Letters to noncustodial parents in such cases were prepared that acknowledged that many delinquent obligors also have visitation problems. Parents were invited to contact the DRO for free help with visitation.

In response to 200 letters mailed to delinquent obligors in February 2005, the DRO only received five calls, of which three met program requirements. These patterns were confirmed in subsequent mailings (*e.g.*, 11 responses to 515 letters mailed in February and March 2005), with the response rate never exceeding 1 to 2 percent. There were no differences in the rate of response to letters sent from the child support agency versus the Domestic Relations Office (with appropriate letterhead and envelopes) and by May 2005, mailings to delinquent obligors were stopped.

The next recruitment strategy that was adopted involved referrals by child support workers. Child support staff report that many noncustodial parents in their caseload complain about not being able to see their child. Accordingly, the plan was to have child support workers identify parents who voiced visitation complaints to them in face-to-face meetings and telephone calls and either to directly enroll them in the project or to provide them with an appropriate enrollment form. Ultimately, 875 noncustodial parents enrolled in the project during more than 21 months of active recruitment.

There are several reasons why the 875 who enrolled in the project may represent an undercount of the actual number of noncustodial parents with visitation problems. One is the potentially large number of interested parents that failed to meet the criteria for participation. In order to participate, the noncustodial parents were required to live in Harris County and have a Harris County court order that included a visitation provision. Although standard possession orders are presumptive in Texas, some orders generated at the child support agency fail to include them, particularly in cases where the parents agree to visitation by “mutual agreement,” or the noncustodial parent fails to appear at the administrative or court hearing and the other parent objects to visitation. In these instances, specific visitation terms are not included in the order, and the noncustodial parent would need to pursue court action to establish visitation rights — a



service not offered by the DRO. In a similar vein, noncustodial parents who wanted to obtain or change legal custody were also excluded from the project since these services were not offered by the DRO.

A focus group conducted with regional managers of child support offices in September 2005 revealed that other criteria were being imposed on an *ad hoc* basis too and that they might have affected the enrollment numbers. For example, one child support office required all parents seeking services to come to the office, meet with a supervisor, and sign a form requesting services. Other offices excluded noncustodial parents with pending legal action, which meant that delinquent obligors with enforcement actions were being disqualified. And still others were reluctant to raise visitation issues and a possible referral to the project during the initial process of establishing a child support order for fear of overstepping their legal boundaries, giving the wrong message, creating a “bottleneck,” or slowing down the effort. The following comments from child support managers are illustrative:

At establishment we need to clarify that he has to pay whether or not he visits and that they are separate. The danger of mentioning access and visitation at all is that they hear what they want to hear. And what they want to hear is that they don't have to pay if they can't visit. It is dangerous to talk about.

We can't ask about visitation problems. That's not in our purview. It's not an excuse for nonpayment. It is a mistake to open it up. You create an excuse for them. They are legally separate and you have to obey the law.

Although attempts were made to eliminate these exclusion criteria and obtain cases at all stages of case processing (establishment and enforcement) including those embroiled in enforcement activity, Table 3 suggests that they may have remained in effect, at least at some child support offices. Relatively few cases were referred to the project following an enforcement action in court, and almost none had experienced the most common enforcement actions — driver's license suspension and/or contempt actions — during up to 18 months prior to being referred to the project. Rather, nearly two-thirds of cases in the project had only gone to court or the child support agency to establish a child support order (with another 6 to 8 percent in court for a divorce action).

While most project cases had only been through establishment, they were far from new to the child support system. Parents had child support orders that were an average of 40 months old when they enrolled in the project. Three-quarters of all project cases had orders that were more than a year old; only 10 percent had orders that were relatively new and had been in effect for six months or less. Thus, referrals to the project for visitation problems rarely were being made in conjunction with the development and promulgation of new child support and visitation orders. This is consistent with the concerns expressed by some child support managers about the dangers of paying attention to visitation matters at early stages of case processing (see Table 3).

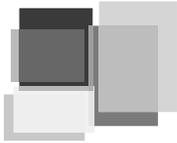


Table 3. Selected Child Support Case Characteristics at Project Enrollment, by Treatment Group

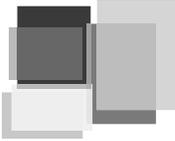
	High Treatment Group	Low Treatment Group
Age of Order, in months		
Mean	42.9	39.9
Median	33.0	29.0
Range	1-178	1-183
Number	(323)	(177)
Percent of cases with orders established		
6 months prior to intake date	13%	10%
12 months prior to intake date	13%	11%
More than 12 months prior to intake date	74%	79%
Percent of cases with various types of court action prior to enrollment		
Establishment order	58%	68%
Enforcement order	21%	17%
Modification order	10%	6%
Divorce order	8%	6%
Percent of cases with enforcement action (court contempt or driver's license suspension) in the 18 months prior to enrollment		
	0.9%	0.4%
Number	(380)	(200)

DRO staff suggested that nonpaying obligors may have been reluctant to stop at an office of the court even for a free service that promised to help them. Although the DRO does not have high visibility in the community, it does provide child support enforcement services for Harris County residents by application and for the courts. Staff report that some noncustodial parents who appeared for project services confided to fearing that the offer was part of a “sting” operation and that they would be prosecuted for nonpayment.

Finally, other noncustodial parents told their child support worker that they had not pursued the referral to the DRO because the threat of enrolling in the project and possibly going to court had made the other parent more responsive and they had taken care of their problem on their own. As one child support manager explained:

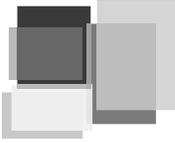
We referred nine cases to the project but only two showed up at the DRO. So we called the noncustodial parents and asked what had happened. They told us that they had contacted the custodial parent directly and said they were going to the DRO and that took care of the problem.

Even though the offer of services to address visitation problems did not attract as many takers as expected, it was viewed as very helpful by child support workers. Managers reported that



workers liked having a resource for those they viewed as having a legitimate complaint. These were people who said, “I’m paying but I can’t see my child.”

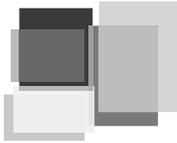
The next section of the report describes the noncustodial parents who enrolled in the project.



Ensuring Access

Encouraging Support

Final Report



V. Project Participants, Children, and Relationships

Profile of Parents Enrolled in the Project

Table 4 presents information on the characteristics of parents who enrolled in the project to obtain help with visitation and were assigned to the high- and low-level treatment groups. Since the two groups were randomly generated, they were not expected to be different.

Almost all (97%) of enrollees in both groups were fathers. Slightly more than half of both groups were African-American, a third were Latino, and about 10 percent were non-Hispanic white. While this differs from the racial composition of Harris County, it is consistent with the racial composition of the child support caseload. Project participants in both treatment groups ranged in age from 18 to 61, with a mean of 32 and a median that was slightly younger (30 and 31).

There were unexpected, significant differences in the educational attainment of noncustodial parents in the two treatment groups. A third of the NCPs in the high treatment group had no high school degree or a GED, as compared with 18 percent in the low-treatment group. There were no differences between the low- and high-level treatment groups with respect to the percentage with college educations.

Fathers in both groups tended to be employed, with approximately two-thirds reporting that they were employed on a full-time basis for a full 12 months in the year preceding their enrollment. While we lacked income information for noncustodial parents in the low-treatment group, those in the high treatment group reported gross annual incomes that ranged from less than \$10,000 to more than \$60,000. More than half (51%) reported incomes that were \$20,000 per year or less; one-fifth earned \$10,000 or less. Thus, although they were employed, many project participants clearly lacked the resources to pursue help with visitation from any source other than the free resources available at the DRO through this project.

One service option offered to parents in the high- level treatment group was KidsnCommon, an Internet-based method of communicating about children that separated and divorced parents could use. To assess the capacity of child support clients to utilize this service, all parents were asked whether they had a home computer with Internet capability. Noncustodial parents in the two groups were nearly identical in their Internet access patterns, with nearly half in each group reporting access to the Internet at their home.

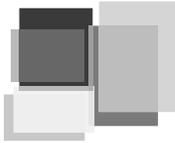
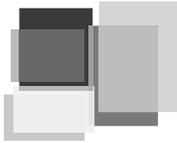


Table 4. Selected Demographic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in High- and Low-Level Treatment Groups

		High Treatment Group	Low Treatment Group
Sex	Female	3%	3%
	Male	97%	97%
	Number	(646)	(229)
Age	Mean	32.4	31.7
	Median	31.0	30.0
	Range	18-61	18-61
	Number	(644)	(226)
Race	African-American	56%	57%
	Latino	33%	32%
	Asian	0.2%	1%
	White	10%	9%
	Other	1%	1%
	Number	(643)	(227)
Education*	No degree	18%	13%
	GED	13%	5%
	High School	54%	70%
	College	16%	12%
	Number	(642)	(216)
Annual gross income	Less than \$10,000 per year	21%	N/A
	Between \$10,001 and \$20,000 per year	30%	N/A
	Between \$20,001 and \$30,000 per year	26%	N/A
	Between \$30,001 and \$40,000 per year	15%	N/A
	Between \$40,001 and 60,000 per year	8%	N/A
	Over \$60,000 per year	2%	N/A
	Number	(387)	
Months employed full-time in last year	0-2 months	5%	6%
	3-6 months	11%	11%
	7-11 months	18%	14%
	12 months	67%	69%
	Number	(541)	(180)
Computer at home with Internet access	Yes	45%	41%
	No	54%	59%
	Number	(528)	(167)

*Chi square is significant at .05.

The only demographic information available for custodial parents came from intake forms completed for 229 members of the high-level treatment group who were reached by DRO staff and interviewed by telephone. They tended to be involved in cases that received attorney consultations and/or parent conferences. Thus, they cannot be assumed to be entirely



representative of all custodial parents in the high-level treatment group, since many parents failed to appear for services or refused to participate.

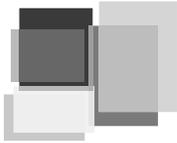
Table 5 shows the limited demographic information on custodial parents that was available. Like noncustodial parents in the project, most custodial parents identified themselves as African-American (50%) or Latino (36%). The proportion that classified themselves as white was 13 percent. A majority of custodial parents (52%) were high school graduates. About a fifth had less than a high school diploma (23%) and college training (25%), respectively.

Table 5. Selected Demographic Characteristics of High-Level Treatment Custodial Parents

Sex	Female	97%
	Male	3%
	Number	(229)
	<hr/>	
Race	African-American	50%
	Latino	36%
	Asian	1%
	White	13%
	Other	0.4%
	Number	(232)
<hr/>		
Education	No degree	15%
	GED	8%
	High school	52%
	College	25%
	Number	(232)

Do parents who participate in access and visitation services resemble noncustodial parents who have been served in other outreach efforts sponsored by the child support agency? Table 6 compares selected characteristics of participants in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project with noncustodial parents who enrolled in OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood programs in seven states (Pearson, *et. al.*, 2003) and the Employment Partnership Project conducted in Tarrant County, Texas (Pearson and Thoennes, 2006). The responsible fatherhood programs provided employment, parenting, and peer support services to low-income, noncustodial parents with the objective of boosting levels of earnings, parent-child contact, and child support payments. The Employment Partnership Project aimed to promote employment and child support payments by providing unemployed noncustodial parents with a special employment counselor.

Table 6 shows that while noncustodial parents who participated in all of these types of programs were approximately 32 years old and that the majority of enrollees were African-American (50% to 56%), there were some differences that distinguished participants in the



Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project. Compared to responsible fatherhood and employment programs, noncustodial parents who sought help with visitation problems were more highly educated and more apt to be employed on a full-time basis and less likely to be unemployed. As to family characteristics, they had fewer children and reported lower levels of parent-child contact than their counterparts in the other type types of programs. Given the fact that they wanted help with visitation problems, it is perhaps not surprising that they were more apt than noncustodial parents in responsible fatherhood and employment programs to report conflict with the other parent.

Table 6. Comparison of Selected Demographic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in Responsible Fatherhood, Employment, and Visitation Projects

	Texas Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support (N=646)	Responsible Fatherhood Programs (N=1,507)	Tarrant County (Texas) Employment Partnership Project (N=412)
Average Age	32.4	33.0	32.4
Race			
African-American	56%	50%	50%
Latino	33%	7%	22%
Asian	0.2%	1%	N/A
White	10%	36%	27%
Other	1%	4%	2%
Education			
No degree	18%	23%	29%
GED	13%	21%	21%
High School	54%	43%	38%
Technical/AA	N/A	9%	6%
College	16%	4%	5%
Annual Income	51% have income below \$20,000 per year	Average earnings at 6 sites ranged from \$14,760 to \$22,836	N/A
Employment in previous 12 months			
Employed Full-time	85%	Ranged from 37% to 61%	73% employed for six months or less
Employed Part-time	9%	Ranged from 24% to 56%	
Not Employed	7%	Ranged from 8% to 25%	19%
Number of children			
One child	80%	57%	39%
Two children	18%	27%	32%
Three or more children	2%	16%	29%
NCP never married to child's other parent	73%	69%	62%

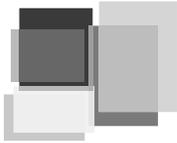


Table 6. Comparison of Selected Demographic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in Responsible Fatherhood, Employment, and Visitation Projects

	Texas Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support (N=646)	Responsible Fatherhood Programs (N=1,507)	Tarrant County (Texas) Employment Partnership Project (N=412)
NCP description of relationship with other parent			
Friendly	10%	31%	41%
Strained/neutral	22%	21%	46%
Angry/hostile	50%	28%	30%
No contact/no relationship	18%	21%	N/A
How often NCP has seen children in past 12 months			
			*
Not at all	36%	20%	22%
Once or twice	22%	19%	12%
A few times per month	23%	19%	25%
A few times per week	12%	42%	50%
Other	7%	N/A	13%

*Percent exceeds 100% due to multiple visits with multiple children.

Children and Parent-Child Contact Patterns

Table 7 presents selected information on the children of parents who enrolled in the project. Patterns for cases in the high- and low-level treatment groups were identical. Nearly all noncustodial parents reported having only one child (77% and 80%) and most of the rest had two (17% and 18%). The average age of children was 6.3 and 6.4 years, while the median was 6.0 and 5.0 years, respectively. A nearly identical proportion in both groups (19% and 23%) had a young child aged one to two years old, and teenagers over the age of 16 (3% and 4%). About half of the noncustodial parents in both groups lived less than 25 miles from their children, a fraction lived more than 100 miles away, and a nearly identical 36 and 38 percent reported that they did not know where the children lived. DRO staff question whether this is always the case. As one worker explained, “Lots of people say they don’t know where the other parent is without having tried to call relatives or do any search.”

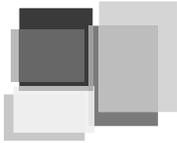


Table 7. Selected Information on Children in Cases in High- and Low-Level Treatment Groups

	High Treatment Group	Low Treatment Group
Number of children		
One	80%	77%
Two	18%	17%
Three or more	2%	6%
Number	(639)	(227)
Ages of children		
Mean	6.4	6.3
Median	6.0	5.0
Range	1-17	1-18
Number	(639)	(227)
Percent with a child age 1- 2 years	19%	23%
Percent with a child age 3-4 years	24%	21%
Percent with a child age 5-6 years	21%	26%
Percent with a child age 7-10 years	29%	27%
Percent with a child age 11-15 years	18%	18%
Percent with a child age 16 or older	3%	4%
Number	(646)	(229)
Distance between NCP and children		
Less than 25 miles	45%	51%
Between 25 and 50 miles	11%	10%
Between 51 and 100 miles	4%	2%
Between 101 and 200 miles	3%	2%
Do not know where children live	38%	35%
Number	(634)	(223)

Figure 2 shows levels of parent-child contact that noncustodial parents reported having during the six months preceding project enrollment. Once again, parents in the low- and high-level treatment groups reported identical patterns of contact. A slim proportion in both groups reported seeing their children “often” or more than once a week. At the opposite end of the continuum, more than a third of NCPs in both groups (36%) reported no contact at all, and about one-fifth (22% to 23%) reported seeing their children only once or twice over a six-month period of time.

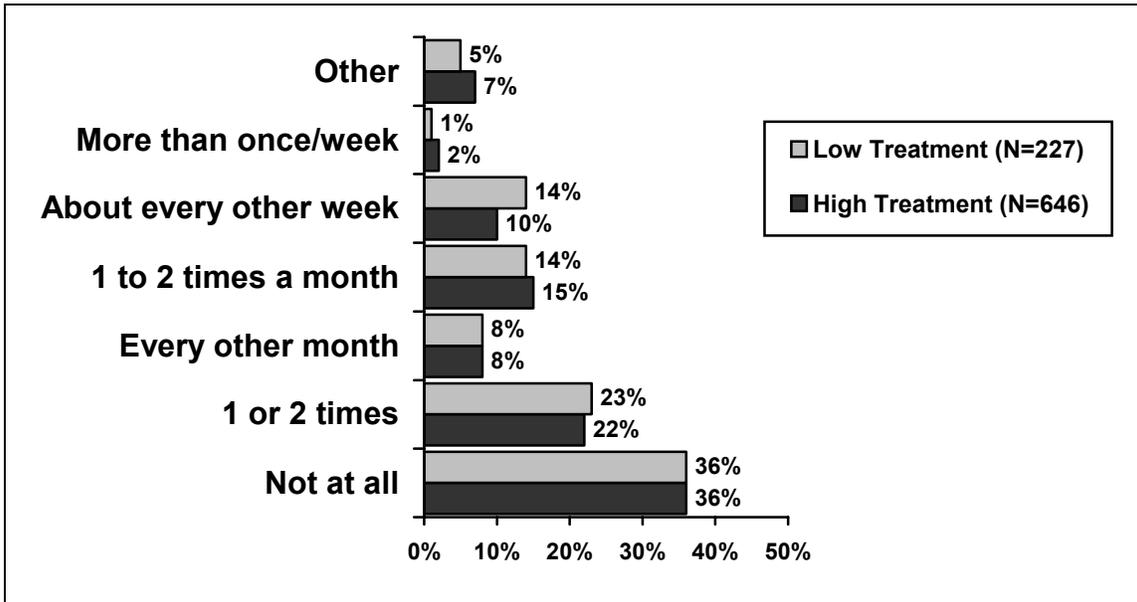
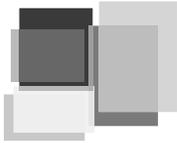


Figure 2. How Often NCP Reports Seeing the Child in the Six Months Prior to Project Enrollment

Parental Relationships

Three-quarters of noncustodial parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups reported that they had never been married to the other parent; a quarter had been previously married. While a majority (53% to 59%) of those who had never married reported cohabitation, a substantial proportion of parents in both groups had never lived together. This was the case for 41 and 47 percent of never-married parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups, respectively. A majority of parents who had previously cohabitated or married had lived apart for more than 24 months. On average, these parents had been apart for four to five years (see Table 8).

Prior research indicates that parental relationships are instrumental in the resolution of access and visitation problems (Pearson, *et al.*, 1996). Accordingly, we assessed how custodial and noncustodial parents characterized their interactions with one another.

The analysis shows that about 10 percent of noncustodial parents in both treatment groups termed their relationship with the other parent as “fairly friendly or cooperative.” Another quarter (22% to 25%) of each group characterized it as “strained.” Nearly half (46% to 50%) reported that their relationship with the other parent was “very strained or angry.” And nearly 20 percent of each group said that they had had no contact with the other parent during the year preceding their enrollment in the project.

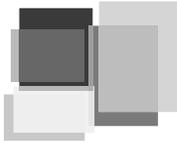


Table 8. Characteristics of NCP and CP Relationship Based On Reports by the NCP, by Group

		High Treatment Group	Low Treatment Group
Were NCP and CP ever married?			
	Yes	27%	25%
	No	73%	75%
	Number	(642)	(229)
If never married, did NCP and CP ever live together?			
	Yes	59%	53%
	No	41%	47%
	Number	(465)	(170)
If married or lived together, how long have NCP and CP been living apart?			
	Six months or less	11%	15%
	Between 7-12 months	11%	13%
	Between 13-24 months	14%	14%
	More than 24 months	64%	58%
	Average months apart*	56.8	47.2
	Number	(432)	(141)
NCP description of the relationship with CP			
	Fairly friendly, cooperative	10%	11%
	A little strained or angry	22%	25%
	Very strained or angry	50%	46%
	No contact in the last 12 months	18%	18%
	Number	(643)	(229)

*Chi square is significant at .08.

In an earlier report on the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project (Center for Policy Research, 2005), we found that parental relationships differed for parents with different marital and cohabitation statuses, and that conflict was highest and quality was poorest among those who never married and had never lived together. Table 9 reexamines this issue for all noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group. It contrasts assessments of parental relationships for those who were previously married, those who never married but cohabitated, and those who never married and never cohabitated. Unlike patterns reported in the preliminary project report, noncustodial parents in all three groups reported similar patterns of couple cooperation and conflict. About half of the respondents in each marital and cohabitation status characterized their relationships as “very strained and angry.” Another fifth reported having had no contact in the previous 12 months.

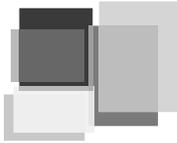


Table 9. NCP Report of Relationship with CP by Marital and Cohabitation Status in High- Level Treatment Group Cases

	Formerly married	Never married, lived together	Never married, Never lived together
Fairly friendly and cooperative	10%	8%	13%
A little strained and angry	21%	22%	24%
Very strained and angry	54%	49%	45%
No contact in the past 12 months	15%	21%	18%
	Number (173)	(266)	(203)

Custodial parents in the high-level treatment group who were interviewed by DRO staff assessed their parental relationships very much like the noncustodial parents in the project. Half termed the relationship as “very strained or angry.” The rest of the respondents, were almost equally divided between characterizing their relationships as “friendly” (15%), “a little strained” (19%), or one in which there had been no contact in the last 12 months (17%) (see Table 10).

Table 10. Assessments of Relationships between the NCP and CP Based On Reports by the CP in High Treatment Group Cases (N=161)

CP description of the relationship with NCP	
Fairly friendly, cooperative	15%
A little strained or angry	19%
Very strained or angry	50%
No contact in the last 12 months	17%
Number	(231)

We get another view of parental conflict from inquires about domestic violence made by DRO staff with members of the high-level treatment group who were interviewed by telephone prior to being scheduled for services (see Table 11). As with visitation problems, reports provided by custodial and noncustodial parents differed. While 23 percent of interviewed noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group said that the other parent was likely to report that she had been hit, slapped, or kicked, this was reported by 48 percent of custodial parents who were interviewed. Nearly as many custodial parents (43%) said that the noncustodial parent had threatened to harm her or someone close to her. And 60 percent said that he “becomes angry and threatening” when she speaks her mind. On the other hand, far fewer custodial parents (25%) said that they were afraid of the noncustodial parent. And in their consultations with DRO attorneys, 13 percent of noncustodial parents reported that they had been arrested for domestic violence and 4 percent reported a current restraining order prohibiting contact with the other parent. Thus, while the incidence of domestic violence reported by custodial parents was extremely high, the reported level of cases with current and present fear or danger was lower, as was the incidence of domestic violence arrests and restraining orders.

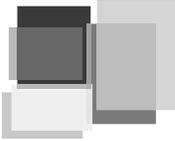


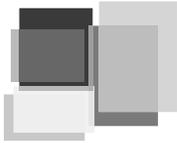
Table 11. Reports of Domestic Violence by CPs and NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group

NCP says CP will report he has hit, slapped or kicked her	23%
	Number (612)
NCP reports in attorney consultation that he has been arrested for domestic violence	13%
NCP reports in attorney consultation that there is a restraining order against one parent	4%
	Number (390)
CP reports NCP has slapped, hit, or kicked her	48%
CP reports NCP has threatened to harm her or someone close to her	43%
CP reports being afraid of the NCP	25%
CP says when she says what she thinks, NCP becomes angry, threatening	60%
	Number (232)

Finally, we present information on the criminal background of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group who pursued services to resolve their access and visitation problems. While more than half (52%) of the 538 noncustodial parents for whom a search of arrests and convictions in Harris County was conducted by a DRO investigator had previously experienced an arrest, only 7 percent had been convicted of a felony. Nearly a fifth (16%) of 391 noncustodial parents who participated in an attorney consultation revealed that a court had placed restrictions on their access to their child. Clearly, the rate of involvement of noncustodial parents in the project with the criminal justice system was substantial (see Table 12).

Table 12. Criminal History and Restrictions on Visitation for NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group

NCP reports during attorney consultation that court has placed restrictions on access	16%
	Number (391)
JIMS (Justice Information Management System) Criminal Search shows	
	Arrest record 52%
	Felony convictions 7%
	Number (538)



VI. Access and Visitation Problems

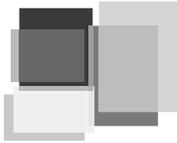
Access and visitation problems are complex. Custodial and noncustodial parents typically cite many problems that are long-standing and entrenched by the time they seek help. For example, the evaluation of the Child Access Demonstration Projects (Pearson, *et al.*, 1996) revealed that both groups of parents reported an average of four to six problems that had begun some 29 months earlier, and that the number of problems increased with the length of time since separation. The study also found that many custodial and noncustodial parents had the same problems including problems with scheduling visitation, fights during drop-off and pick-up, and problems caused by new relationships. While lack of visitation was the most frequent problem mentioned by noncustodial parents, many complained about the other parent being unsupportive of them as parents or denigrating them in front of the children. For their part, custodial parents were frequently concerned about the safety of the children while in the other parent's care. Many challenged the allegation that they had denied or withheld visitation and accused noncustodial parents of missing visits or visiting irregularly. Indeed, a third of all custodial parents agreed with the statement "The other parent sees the children infrequently and they really need to have more contact with him/her."

Table 13 provides information on the types of access and visitation problems reported by noncustodial parents who enrolled in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project. The most common complaint offered by an overwhelming proportion of noncustodial parents in both groups (91%) was "not being allowed to see the children." Other common complaints registered by about a third of the noncustodial parents in each group were not knowing where the children live and "disagreements about what the visitation order says."

Noncustodial parents anticipated that the other parent would have a different view of the visitation situation. Slightly less than two-thirds of both groups expected that the other parent would concede that there were disagreements about what the order says. In a similar vein, about a quarter of both groups expected the other parent would report that there was "general confusion about what the order says." Thus, confusion and disagreement about the existing order were viewed as common problems for both custodial and noncustodial parents.

Another set of concerns that noncustodial parents expected custodial parents to raise dealt with inconsistent and erratic visitation. Many noncustodial parents anticipated that the other parent would accuse him of failing to "stick to a schedule," "arriving late or returning the children late," and/or "making last minute cancellations."

Finally, a substantial proportion of noncustodial parents expected that the other parent would attribute the visitation problem to the noncustodial parent's new partner, although this expectation



was more pronounced among parents in the high-level treatment group (39%) than in the low-level treatment group (31%). About a fifth in both groups expected the custodial parent to complain about fighting during drop-off or pick-up. Approximately 10 percent thought that the custodial parent would express concerns about their use of alcohol and drugs.

These issues appear to have been problems for project participants for quite a while. Noncustodial parents in both groups reported that their visitation conflicts had been going on for an average of 20 to 23 months and a median of 8 to 12. In an attempt to address these problems, an identical 25 to 30 percent of noncustodial parents in both groups reported that they had already called the statewide Access and Visitation Hotline. Only a few parents in each group had hired a private attorney.

Table 13. Nature of the Access and Visitation Problem and its Duration Reported by NCPs, by Group

	High Treatment Group	Low Treatment Group
Nature of the problem reported by the NCP		
Not allowed to see the children	91%	91%
Would like to see children more than order allows	1%	1%
Do not know where children are living	36%	31%
Children are not safe where they are living	2%	1%
There is confusion about what the visitation order provides	6%	4%
There are disagreements about what the visitation order says	32%	31%
Number	(643)	(229)
NCP believes the CP will report the following are AV problems		
NCP does not stick to a schedule*	29%	19%
NCP arrives late, returns children late*	15%	7%
NCP misses visits or cancels at the last moment*	31%	20%
There is general confusion about what the order says	26%	21%
There are disagreements about what the order says	64%	59%
There is fighting at pick-up and/or drop-off	23%	23%
The NCP's new partner is a problem*	39%	31%
The NCP's drug or alcohol use is a problem	13%	8%
Number	(613)	(215)
Number of months AV problems have been going on		
Average	23.3	20.3
Median	12.0	8.0
Range	1-192	1-144
Percent reporting 6 months or less	38%	41%
Percent reporting 7 to 12 months	17%	15%
Percent reporting 13 to 25 months	13%	9%
Percent reporting 25 months or more	32%	36%
Number	(623)	(221)

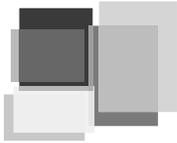


Table 13. Nature of the Access and Visitation Problem and its Duration Reported by NCPs, by Group

	High Treatment Group	Low Treatment Group
Actions NCP has taken to resolve AV problems		
Called the AG Hotline	30%	25%
Has been through visitation enforcement services	3%	4%
Hired an attorney	2%	3%
Number	(643)	(225)

Custodial parents in the high-level treatment group who were contacted by DRO staff and interviewed about their perspective on the visitation problem agreed with the other parent that it had been going on for a long time. Indeed, custodial parents reported that their visitation problems had lasted for an average of 26.8 months, with half lasting for more than 18 months.

Custodial parents also tended to agree with the noncustodial parent about the frequency of parent-child contact. Fully 36 percent said that the noncustodial parent had not seen the children at all during the preceding 12 months, 22 percent said that contact had occurred once or twice, 6 percent characterized the frequency of contact as “every other month,” 15 percent termed it once or twice per month, and 13 percent said it was every other week. Visitation problems clearly occur among parents with frequent contact as well as among those with no contact at all (see Table 14).

Table 14. Duration of Access and Visitation Problems and Frequency of NCP Visits Based on CP Report for Cases in High-Level Treatment Group

Number of months have had Access and Visitation problems	
Mean	26.8
Median	18.0
Range	1-156
Number	(197)
How often NCP has seen children in the past 12 months	
Not at all/never	36%
About once or twice	22%
About every other month	6%
About once or twice a month	15%
About every week	13%
More than once a week	1%
Other	7%
Number	(230)

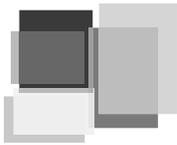


Figure 3 compares what 216 interviewed custodial parents actually said about their visitation problems with the expectations of custodial parent responses voiced by 611 noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group. It shows that the noncustodial parent frequently fails to understand the concerns the other parent has about visitation and that there are big discrepancies between what fathers think mothers will say and what mothers actually do say about visitation. For example, while 29 percent of noncustodial parents thought that custodial parents would be upset by their failure to stick to a regular visitation schedule, this was voiced by 65 percent of all interviewed custodial parents. In a similar fashion, while 31 percent of noncustodial parents thought that the other parent would be upset by missed or cancelled visits, this was a concern for 63 percent of interviewed custodial parents. Clearly, irregular visitation behavior and cancelled visits are big irritants for custodial parents, something that is not fully appreciated by many noncustodial parents.

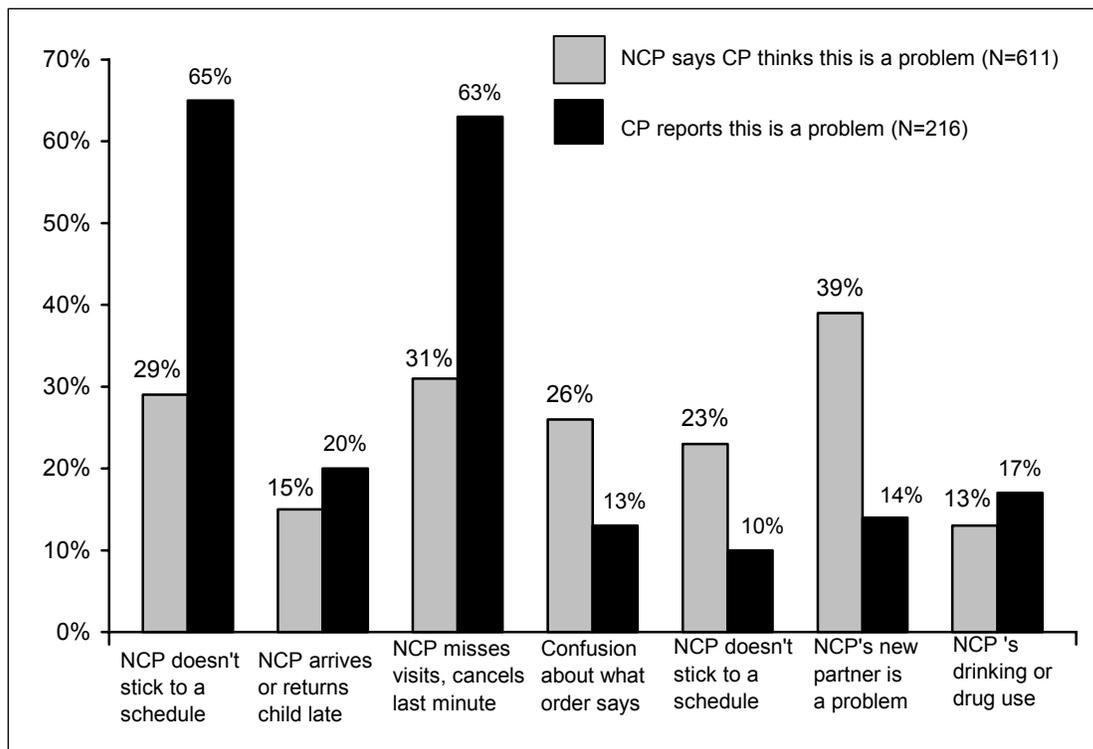
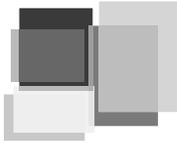


Figure 3. Comparison of Access and Visitation Problems Reported by NCPs and CPs in the High Treatment Group

Another area of discrepancy had to do with the role of new partners in visitation problems. While 39 percent of noncustodial parents thought that this was a factor in their visitation problem, this was voiced by only 14 percent of interviewed custodial parents. And while 26 percent of noncustodial parents thought the other parent was confused about what the order said, this was expressed by only 13 percent of interviewed custodial parents.



VII. Project Services

The Domestic Relations Office offered project participants in the high-level treatment group a free consultation with an attorney and a parent conference with a facilitator trained in mediation techniques. As previously noted, 646 noncustodial parents self-identified or were identified by child support personnel as having a visitation problem and were referred to the DRO for services. An additional 229 noncustodial parents were identified as having visitation problems using the same techniques and were assigned to the low-level treatment group, where they only received mailed information on visitation enforcement and the services available to address these problems in the Houston area. This section of the report traces the services that parents in the high-level treatment group pursued and received, and the characteristics of those who received services versus those who dropped out of the project before being served.

Project Attrition

Nonappearance is a major problem with child support populations. Many noncustodial parents fail to respond to notices for child support conferences and hearings, and many child support actions are taken without their participation. Child support agencies and court-based programs like the DRO were interested in learning whether noncustodial parents would be more diligent about pursuing services to address their visitation problems.

Of the 646 clients in the high-level treatment group, 257 did not follow through with project contacts and consequently did not receive any services. This represented an attrition rate of 40 percent among those who took the formal step of enrolling in the project. The other 389 clients in the high treatment group received services through the project, either in the form of an attorney consultation or both an attorney consultation and a parent conference. Ten cases ultimately resulted in litigation. Of those who pursued services, approximately one-third (34%) solely met with an attorney, and just over one quarter (26%) both met with an attorney for a free consultation and also had a parent conference. Looked at somewhat differently, only 26 percent of NCPs with visitation problems offered free services designed to address those issues used the full menu of basic services available to them.

Table 15. Project Services Used by NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group

Low- level treatment group	229
High- level treatment group	646
Had an Attorney Consultation Only	34% (221)
Had an Attorney Consultation and Parent Conference	26% (168)
Failed to Follow Through/No Services Received	40% (257)

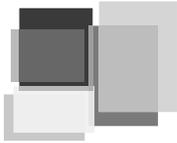


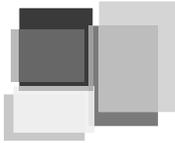
Table 16 assesses whether parents in the high-level treatment group with certain demographic characteristics were more apt to appear for services or fail to appear. The analysis shows that the two groups were virtually indistinguishable in many respects. The average age of parents in both groups was 32. More to the point, there were no significant differences in the percentage of noncustodial parents who received services based on levels of education and months of employment during the 12 months prior to project enrollment.

One difference between the two groups that was statistically significant dealt with race and ethnicity. Noncustodial parents who were Hispanic were significantly more likely to appear and receive services (67% versus 34%), while their African-American and white counterparts were equally likely to receive services and drop out. Ownership of a home computer with Internet access was also associated with a significant difference in services receipt. Parents who reported having this type of computer resource were significantly more likely to appear for services and not drop out.

Table 16. Selected Characteristics of NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group Who Did and Did Not Receive Services

		Average Age			
Received services		32.7			
Did not receive services		32.0			
*Race		African-American	Hispanic	White	
	Received services	58%	67%	56%	
	Did not receive services	42%	34%	44%	
	Number	(361)	(209)	(64)	
Education		No degree	GED	High School	College
	Received services	62%	64%	59%	59%
	Did not receive services	38%	36%	41%	41%
	Number	(117)	(81)	(344)	(100)
Months employed full-time in past year		0-2 months	3-6 months	7-11 months	12 months
	Received services	50%	58%	58%	62%
	Did not receive services	50%	42%	42%	38%
	Number	(26)	(57)	(95)	(363)
*Computer at home with Internet access		Yes			No
	Received services	64%			54%
	Did not receive services	36%			46%
	Number	(238)			(290)

*Chi square is significant at .1.



We also considered whether parents who reported certain relationship characteristics and/or types of access and visitation disputes were more or less apt to appear for services. Table 17 shows that these factors failed to explain patterns of attrition. Statistically identical proportions of parents who termed their relationship with the other parent as friendly, strained, angry, and nonexistent wound up dropping out and pursuing additional project services. In a similar vein, reported levels of parent-child contact failed to distinguish between service users and dropouts, nor were there any statistically significant differences in the proportions of parents with recent versus lengthy disputes about visitation that received services or dropped.

Finally, we compared attendance patterns for noncustodial parents with various types of visitation problems. The only problem types that were associated with different attendance patterns involved wanting to see children more often than the visitation order allowed and feeling that the children were unsafe where they were living. Noncustodial parents who reported these types of problems were significantly more likely to appear for services, although the small numbers of parents with these problems make the finding somewhat less reliable.

Table 17. Comparison of Parental Relationships and Access and Visitation Problems Reported by NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group Who Received Services with Those Who Failed To Follow Through and Did Not Receive Services

Relationship with other parent	Friendly	Strained	Angry	No Contact
Received services	58%	57%	65%	54%
Did not receive services	42%	43%	36%	46%
Number	(66)	(142)	(318)	(117)
Amount of contact NCP had with children in past six months	No contact	Once or twice per month	A few times per month	A few times per week
Received services	58%	60%	63%	62%
Did not receive services	42%	40%	37%	38%
Number	(230)	(141)	(147)	(69)
Average number of months have had problems with access and visitation	Less than 6 months	7-12 months	12-24 months	More than 24 months
Received services	61%	62%	67%	57%
Did not receive services	39%	38%	33%	44%
Number	(237)	(104)	(82)	(200)
Average number of months from order establishment to project intake	Less than 6 months	7-12 months	More than 12 months	
Received services	49%	58%	55%	
Did not receive services	51%	42%	45%	
Number	(41)	(43)	(244)	

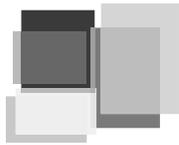


Table 17. Comparison of Parental Relationships and Access and Visitation Problems Reported by NCPs in the High-Level Treatment Group Who Received Services with Those Who Failed To Follow Through and Did Not Receive Services

Types of visitation problems reported by NCP	Not allowed to see kids	*Would like to see kids more than order allows	Do not know where kids live	*Safety of children	Confusion about visitation order	Disagreements about what visitation order allows
Received services	61%	100%	59%	83%	54%	58%
Did not receive services	39%	0%	41%	17%	46%	42%
Number	(584)	(6)	(232)	(12)	(37)	(204)

* Chi square is significant between those that received services and those that did not at .05.

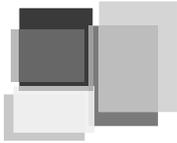
Previous research shows that noncustodial parents hunger for more access to lawyers and the legal system (Pearson, *et al.*, 1996). Thus, it was very surprising that so many noncustodial parents passed up the opportunity to have a free consultation with a DRO attorney. In an attempt to better understand the characteristics of noncustodial parents who met with attorneys and those who failed to appear, we compared rates of appearance for parents with various levels of education and marital and cohabitation statuses. None of the patterns were statistically significant. Statistically equivalent proportions appeared and dropped out in each educational category (college degree, high school diploma, GED or less), and marital or cohabitation arrangement, with about 60 percent of parents in each category appearing and 40 percent failing to appear (see Table 18).

Table 18. Factors Associated with Appearance or Failure to Appear for the Attorney Consultation

	NCP has college degree or higher	NCP has high school diploma	NCP has GED or no degree
NCP appeared for attorney consultation	59%	59%	63%
NCP failed to appear for attorney consultation	41%	41%	37%
Number	(100)	(344)	(198)

	NCP and CP were married	NCP and CP lived together	NCP and CP never lived together
NCP appeared for attorney consultation	64%	57%	62%
NCP failed to appear for attorney consultation	36%	43%	38%
Number	(173)	(266)	(203)

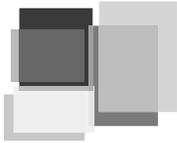
DRO attorneys almost always recommend that noncustodial parents participate in a parent conference and attempt to work out their visitation problems with the assistance of a trained neutral. Of the 389 noncustodial parents who appeared at the Domestic Relations Office to obtain visitation services, only 221 participated in an attorney consultation, while 168 participated in both an attorney consultation and a parent conference. Table 19 examines selected characteristics of noncustodial parents who appeared for an attorney consultation with those who pursued both



an attorney consultation and a parent conference. As with other comparisons of those who use services and those who do not, few demographic differences distinguished noncustodial parents in the two groups. They were both an identical 32 years old, approximately half were African-American and more than a third were Latino, just over half were high school graduates, over two-thirds of both groups reported being employed on a full-time basis during the 12 months prior to project enrollment, and approximately half reported having a home computer with Internet access.

Table 19. Selected Demographic Characteristics of NCPs in High-Level Treatment Group With an Attorney Consultation Versus Those with a Consultation and a Parent Conference

		Attorney Consultation Only	Attorney Consultation and Parent Conference
Average Age		32.6	32.8
	Number	(221)	(167)
Race			
	African-American	55%	52%
	Latino	35%	37%
	Asian	0%	1%
	White	9%	10%
	Other	1%	1%
	Number	(220)	(168)
Education			
	No degree	19%	19%
	GED	13%	14%
	High school	54%	51%
	College	15%	16%
	Number	(220)	(167)
Months employed full-time in last year			
	0-2 months	4%	4%
	3-6 months	12%	9%
	7-11 months	16%	18%
	12 months	68%	70%
	Number	(183)	(142)
Computer at home with Internet access			
	Yes	53%	46%
	No	47%	54%
	Number	(171)	(138)



Attorney Consultations

Noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group who visited the DRO had an opportunity to meet with a staff attorney for a free consultation about their access and visitation situation. A total of 389 noncustodial parents took advantage of this opportunity. Nearly two-thirds had a standard possession order when they met with the DRO attorney. Most of the rest (30%) had an order that involved some modification of the standard possession order (see Figure 4).

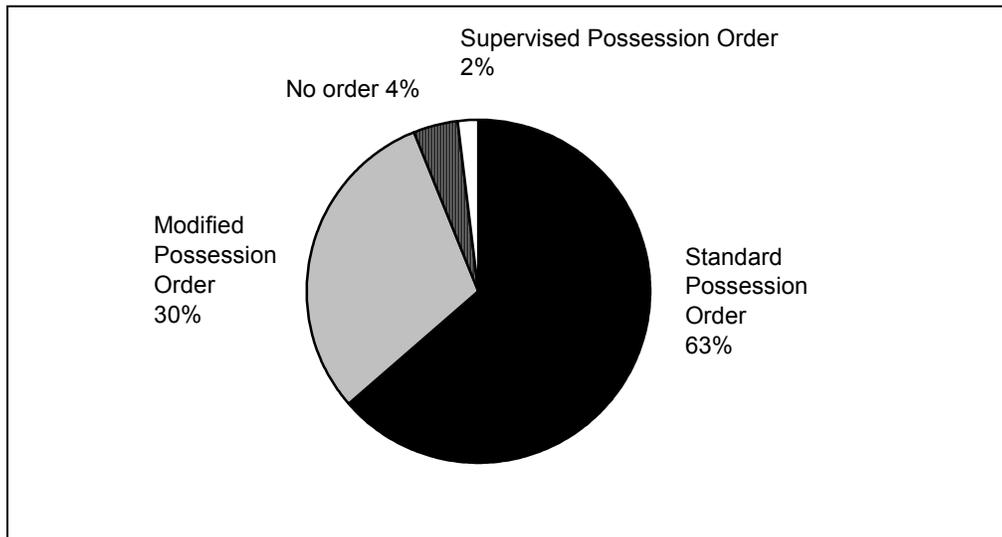
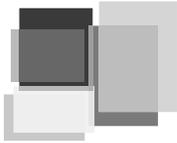


Figure 4. Type of Visitation Order in Place at Consultation with DRO Attorney for NCPs in the High- Level Treatment Group (N=363)

Attorneys used the conference to interview parents about factors that might affect litigation outcomes: substance abuse, criminal records, domestic violence, and the number of verified denials. They also reviewed the legal status of the order and the nature of the access and visitation problem. They spent time educating noncustodial parents about standard possession orders, visitation enforcement, and the information needed prior to the initiation of any enforcement litigation. According to the DRO's policy manual, the litigation process requires documentation of visitation denial.

Experience has shown that the motion will be more successful when the applicant has more than one denial. The office recommends three (3) verified denials prior to initiating litigation. These denials can be before or after the parent conference. There are exceptions due to safety concerns, lack of locate, custodial parent's maliciousness, etc.

Figure 5 shows that nearly all consultations with attorneys involved an explanation of the visitation order and a discussion of how visitation is enforced in Texas (95%). Typically, attorneys also discussed the importance of keeping a visitation diary (86%) and a log of attempted



visits and denials. In most cases (92%), attorneys also discussed child support issues including the importance of making regular child support payments and making additional payments towards any arrears. Although child support is “not relevant for visitation,” DRO attorneys feel that non-payment “hurts their posture in court on a practical level.” Attorneys were less apt to focus on how parent behavior affects children (75%) and litigation solutions to access and visitation problems (68%) in their conferences with project participants.

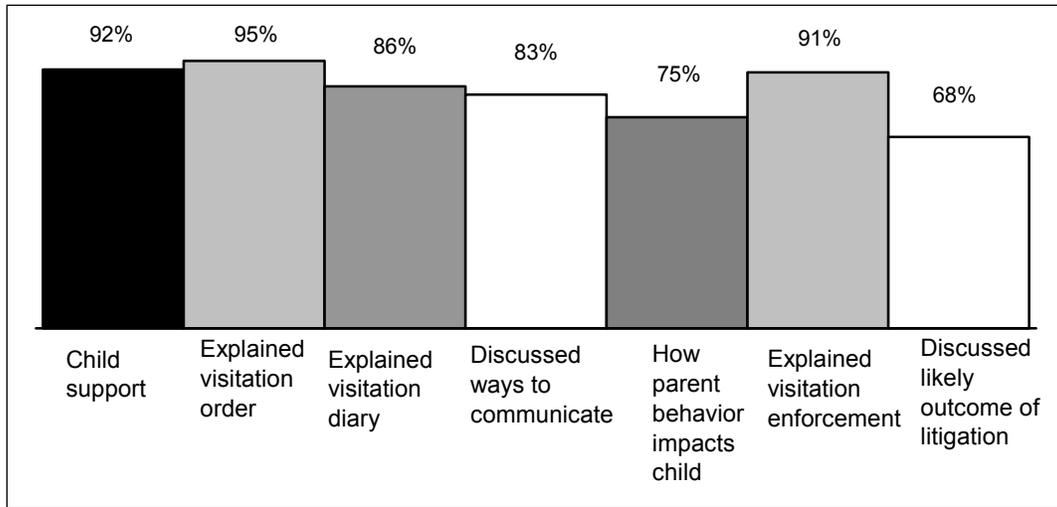
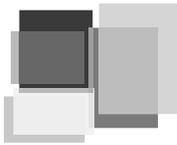


Figure 5. Issues Discussed During Consultation with DRO Attorney for NCPs in the High-Treatment Group (N=389)

Not surprisingly, many noncustodial parents who met with a DRO attorney reported having problems paying their child support in a timely manner. Almost half (47%) attributed their difficulties to having a new family or other children to support. Many others (39%) reported not being regularly employed. Another common problem cited by noncustodial parents was having an order that was set too high (38%). Nearly a quarter (22%) of noncustodial parents admitted to being unwilling to pay support if they were not allowed to visit (see Table 20).

Table 20. Problems Paying Child Support Reported by NCPs During Consultations with DRO Attorneys

NCP reports having a child support obligation	94%
Number	(342)
Among those owing child support, percent reporting the following problems in paying	
Not regularly employed	39%
Injured or disabled and not able to work	15%
Child support order is set too high	38%
New family or other children to support	47%
Not willing to pay if visits are not allowed	22%
The other parent does not need the money	15%
Number	(319)



The chief outcome of the attorney consultation was the suggestion that the parents attend a conference with a trained DRO facilitator aimed at generating a consensual agreement about access and visitation. This was recommended by attorneys in 97 percent of the cases. According to project records, the attorney recommended that 20 percent of noncustodial parents attend a free class on how to avoid conflict offered by Escape Resource Center. Litigation was recommended in only 3 percent of the cases seen by attorneys at the DRO, with only 10 cases ultimately resulting in a court filing. These cases typically involved situations where the custodial parent refused to participate in a conference (or the conference was unsuccessful) and the noncustodial parent had documented multiple attempts to visit.

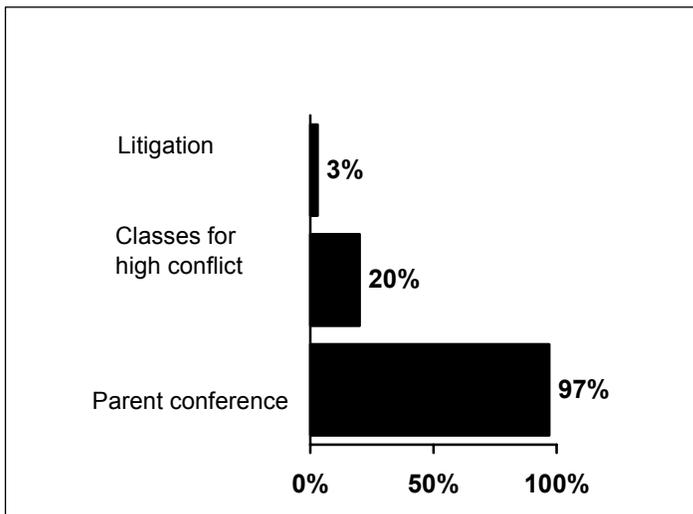


Figure 6. Action Recommended by DRO Attorney During Consultation With NCPs in High- Level Treatment Group (N=340)

Parent Conferences

A total of 168 noncustodial parents and their partners participated in a parent conference with a trained facilitator at the DRO. At the start, parents were asked to view a video produced by the OAG on the importance of parental involvement and the destructive effects of parental conflict on children. Afterwards, they met with a facilitator to both privately “tell their story” and jointly to try to resolve their dispute. Facilitators report that during the two-hour sessions, they identified the issues, moderated the exchange between the parents, suggested solutions to similar problems developed by other parents in other conferences, and helped to craft a written agreement.

According to facilitators, the most common topic they addressed dealt with the practical issue of when the noncustodial parent would see the children. This was reported to have been discussed in 85 percent of conferences that were held. Other commonly discussed topics were what the visitation order provides (74%) and ways to improve co-parenting (72%).

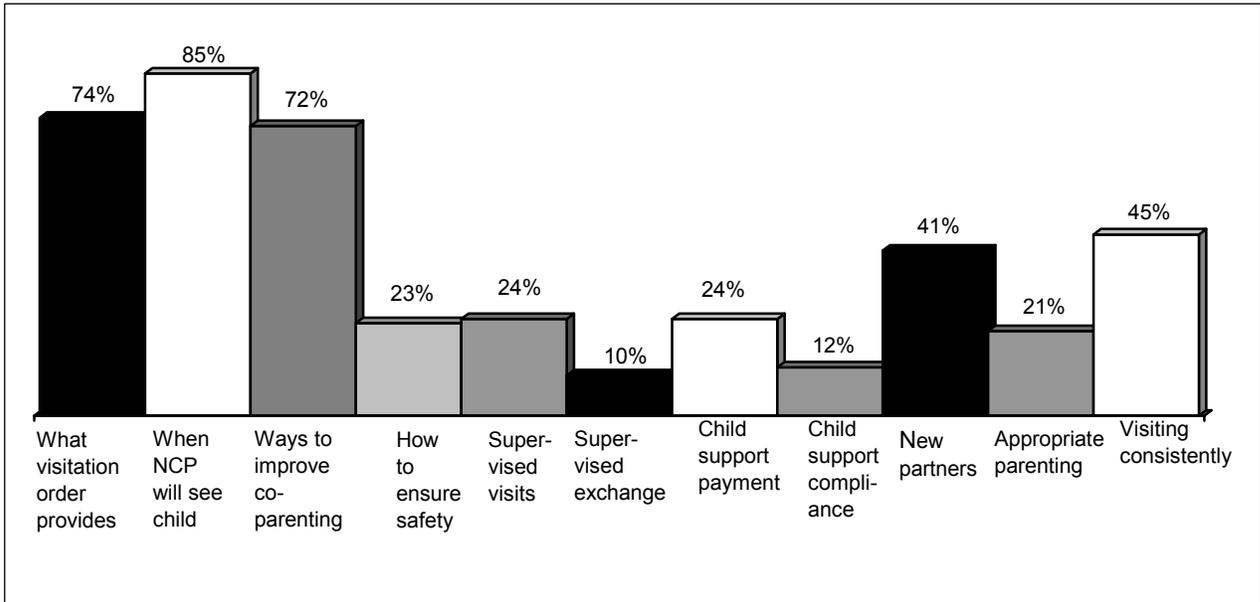
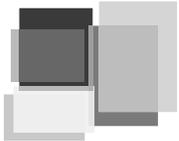


Figure 7. Issues Discussed During Parent Conferences at the DRO (N=168)

Many other topics were discussed less routinely during parent conferences. This included the role of new partners (41%), child support payment issues including irregular payments and their impact on families (24%), supervised visitation (24%), how to ensure safety during visits (23%), appropriate parenting behaviors (21%), child support compliance (12%), and supervised exchanges (10%). The range of topics raised in conferences reflects attention to the concerns of both noncustodial and custodial parents. According to DRO staff, it is very important to be attentive to concerns held by custodial parents and avoid the appearance of being one sided. As one facilitator explained:

To get custodial parents to come to the conference, we had to explain that we would help her with her complaints. That it was not a one-sided deal. We had to show her that we weren't just taking his side. There are always two sides to the story. And if you took a more dramatic stance on the NCP's behalf, you would lose her buy in.

Facilitators reported that parents displayed a range of relationships when they appeared for a conference. Approximately one-quarter were judged to be on relatively good terms with the other parent and were characterized as “fairly cooperative” (28%) or a “little angry” (17%). The other half were assessed to be more highly conflicted and were termed “somewhat” (23%) or “very” hostile (22%) (see Figure 8).

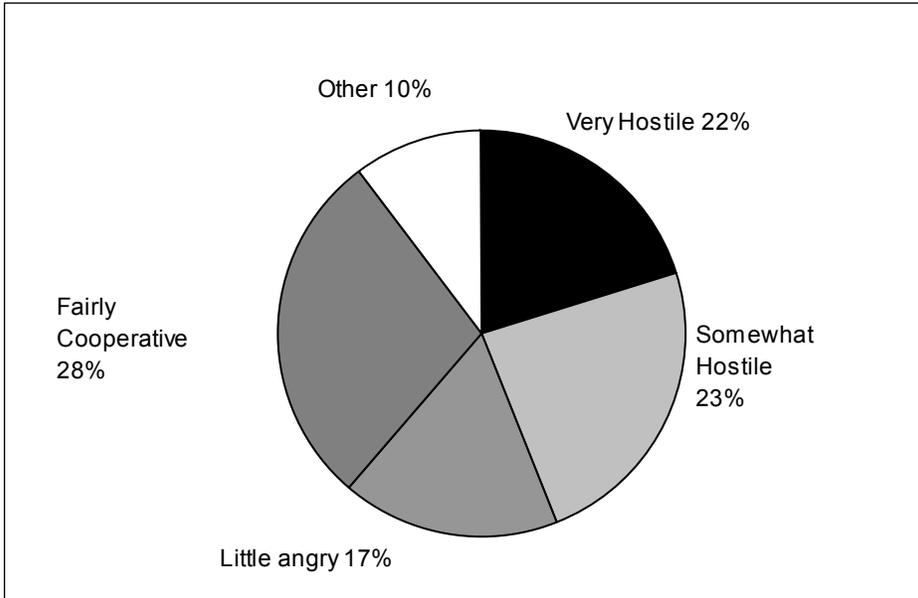
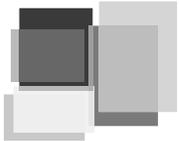


Figure 8.
Rating of
Parents'
Relationship by
Facilitator of
Parent
Conference
(N=155)

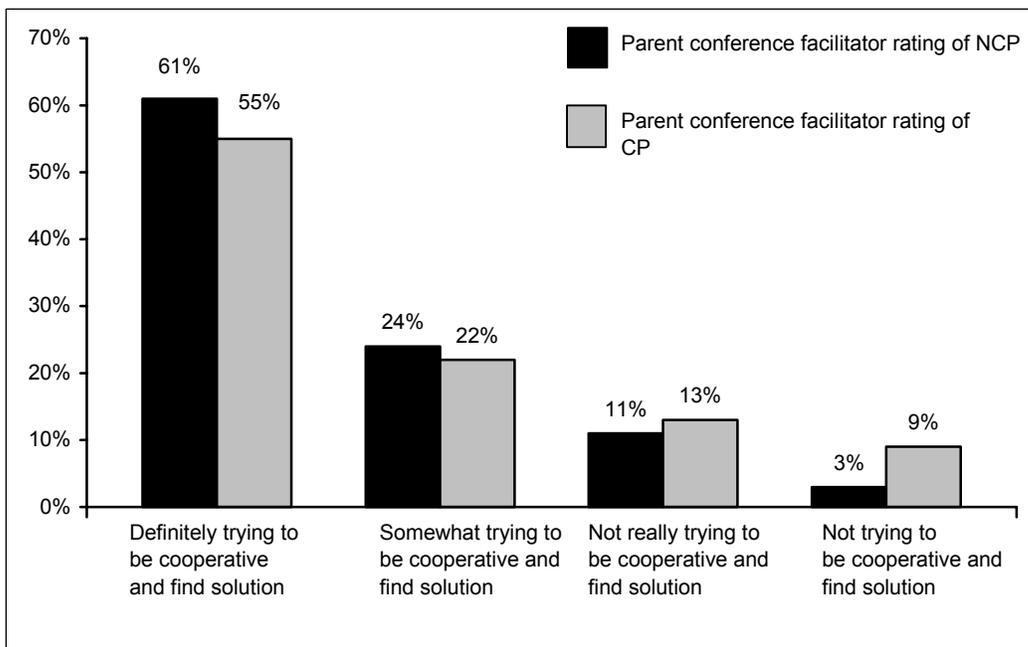
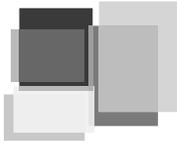


Figure 9. Ratings of Parents' Efforts to Solve the Visitation Problems by DRO Facilitator of Parent Conferences (N=158)

Given the range of relationship patterns displayed during the conference, it is perhaps not surprising that facilitators rated over half (55% to 61%) of both custodial and noncustodial parents as “definitely trying to be cooperative and find a solution.” Another quarter (22% to 24%) of both noncustodial and custodial parents were rated as trying “somewhat” to be cooperative. Custodial parents were three times as likely as noncustodial parents to be rated as being totally



uncooperative, with 9 percent garnering this classification as opposed to only 3 percent of noncustodial parents.

Most parents (78%) who participated in a parent conference produced an agreement, and only 22 percent were unsuccessful. This rate is comparable to agreement rates reported for most private and court-based mediation programs (Kelly, 1996; Pearson, 1999). It is also identical to agreement rates produced in mediation interventions with child support clients. For example, in the OCSE-funded Responsible Fatherhood Program conducted in the child support agency in San Mateo County, California, 72 percent of those who tried to mediate reached an agreement (Pearson, *et al.*, 2003). The OIG found that 76 percent of parents who mediated at four of the programs it studied produced an agreement (OIG, 2002). Similarly, the evaluation of mediation programs funded by State Access and Visitation Grants in three states revealed an agreement rate of 79 percent (Pearson, *et al.*, 2004).

Nearly all of the agreements (90%) dealt with when the noncustodial parent could visit with the children. The second most common topic addressed in the agreement was ways of improving communication between the parents (53%). This typically involved the exchange of current address and telephone information to permit the exercise of visitation, decisions about the exchange of school and medical information, plans regarding the participation of each parent in school events and extracurricular activities, and methods of building parental trust (see Figure 10).

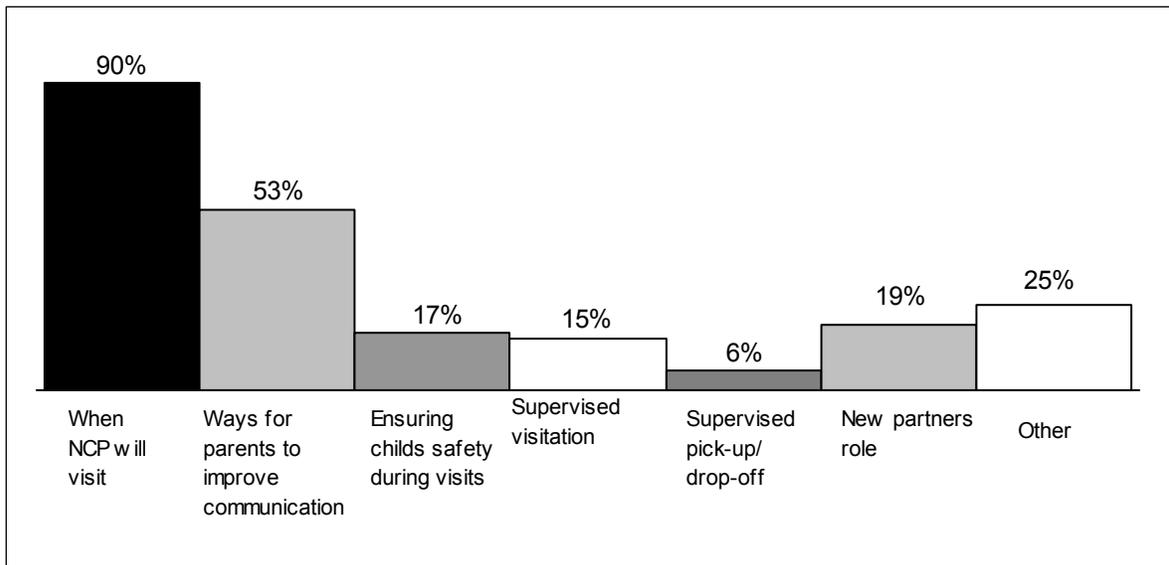
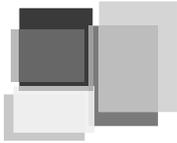


Figure 10. Topics Addressed in Agreements Produced in Parent Conferences (N=101)



According to facilitators, approximately half (53%) of the agreements generated during the parent conferences called for the same amount of contact contained in the standard possession order routinely promulgated by the court in child support cases, while a quarter (26%) involved a gradual increase in contact. Other agreement terms that appeared in at least a fifth of the cases dealt with changes in drop-off and pick-up times and locations and the use of telephone contact (see Figure 11).

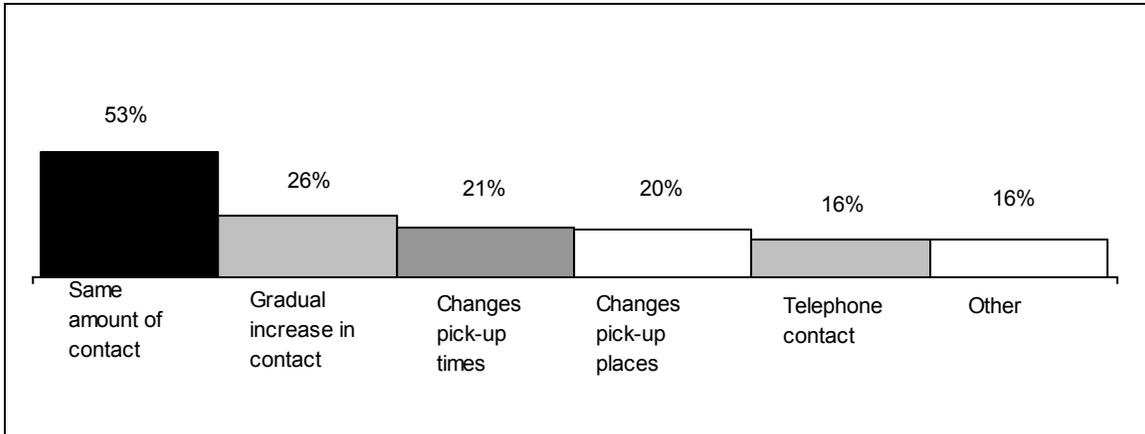


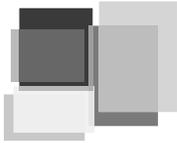
Figure 11. How the Agreement Reached in Parent Conference Compares to Court Order (N=101)

Litigation

Most DRO cases to enforce visitation are resolved without court intervention through a consultation with an attorney followed by a parent conference. If the parent conference does not produce an agreement, however, litigation may be initiated.

Six cases in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project were litigated, and staff attorneys at the DRO filed motions to compel the other party to comply with the court’s visitation order. The DRO will only litigate in cases that meet certain requirements: a final order granted by a Harris County Court and an unsuccessful parent conference or a custodial parent refusal to participate in a parent conference following contact with her. Although not required, it is recommended that the applicant be current in his support payments and be making additional payments towards any arrears balance. Finally, the DRO requires that applicants have three verified episodes of visitation denial.

Following an unsuccessful conference, applicants are instructed to send a letter to the custodial parent informing her of intent to exercise visitation per the schedule approved in the court order. They are also required to follow the child support and visitation terms of the order, keep a journal or calendar recording all visitation attempts and outcomes, involve a non-interested party to



witness attempts to exercise visitation, and acquire three episodes of denied visitation that are witnessed by a third party. The DRO may also require that a requesting party attend a parent education class conducted by Escape Resource Center.

DRO attorneys report that more cases than six were suitable for litigation, but that most were settled prior to filing in court or dropped because the applicant failed to generate the necessary documentation. While some noncustodial parents are relieved to discover that there are steps they can take that might lead to relief in the court system, others find the requirements too burdensome. As one attorney put it, “They say ‘If I wasn’t paying my child support, the state would come after me. But to get my visitation enforced, I have to do all this. It’s not fair.’”

Table 21 summarizes fact situations, DRO actions and outcomes for the six cases that were litigated by DRO attorneys. With one exception, they all led to agreed orders that called for jail sentences that were suspended, make-up visitation time or faster movement toward exercise of the visitation schedule embodied in the Standard Possession Order, and compliance hearings to ensure that both parties adhered to the terms of the agreed order. Although litigation is rarely used, it is believed to be essential to the DRO’s visitation enforcement program because it is the only way of achieving tangible relief when other measures have been exhausted and the custodial parent is intransigent.

Table 21. Summary of Facts, DRO Actions, and Outcomes in Litigated Cases

	Facts	DRO Actions	Outcomes
1	Order called for NCP to exercise 60 months of visitation with 6-month-old under supervision of CP before graduating to Standard Possession Order (SPO) visit schedule. CP moved and did not notify NCP of address change and refused to participate in parent conference.	DRO filed contempt motion regarding CP’s failure to notify NCP of address. DRO filed amended contempt motion with specific violations.	Agreed order reached holding CP in contempt. Jail sentence assessed but suspended. NCP allowed to go to SPO 1 month earlier. Order modified to allow neutral entity to supervise remaining visits rather than CP. Specific date set for NCP to move to SPO. Compliance hearing set.
2	Order grants NCP visitation per SPO for 3-year-old child. CP allows visits to occur but then denies. Parent Conference held (2 sessions), and CP agrees to allow visits. These occur for 6 months, but then stop again.	DRO files contempt motion for failure to surrender child on 11 specific dates.	Agreement reached holding CP in contempt. Jail sentence assessed but suspended. Make-up time awarded to NCP. Compliance hearing set.
3	Order calls for graduated visitation of 3-month-old leading to SPO upon conclusion of 4 stages of visits, each lasting 19 periods of possession but terms and dates and conditions lacking from order. NCP lacked locate information on CP. CP refused to attend parent conference.	DRO filed contempt motion for CP’s failure to notify NCP of address change and requested order to spell out SPO terms and conditions.	DRO dropped contempt motion because NCP misrepresented facts, was not actively and consistently exercising visitation, and was discussing relinquishing his rights.

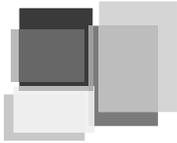
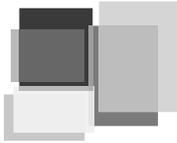


Table 21. Summary of Facts, DRO Actions, and Outcomes in Litigated Cases

	Facts	DRO Actions	Outcomes
4	Order calls for visitation per SPO for 3- and 5-year-old. CP refused to allow visits or disclose current address because of NCP's past drug use. NCP said he was sober. Parent conference resulted in impasse, and CP refused to reveal address.	DRO filed contempt motion.	Contested hearing held. Court held CP in contempt for failing to surrender children and failing to disclose address. Jail sentence and \$500 fine assessed but suspended conditioned on future compliance. Three make-up visits ordered. CP placed on community supervision for 6 months. Compliance hearing set.
5	Order calls for visitation per SPO. CP denied visitation because child drew picture of naked person and CP accused NCP of showing porn to child. Child Protective Services ruled out inappropriate behavior by NCP. Parent conference resulted in impasse.	DRO filed contempt motion.	Agreement reached holding CP in contempt. Jail sentence assessed but suspended conditioned on future compliance. Four weekends of make-up visitation granted. CP ordered to attend parent education course (NCP had attended). Compliance hearing set.
6	Order calls for visitation per SPO. NCP alleged CP denied visits because of his new partner. CP said child was afraid to visit because new partner disciplined the child.	Show cause hearing set. DRO subsequently filed contempt motion.	CP agreed to informal agreement for 30 days and case set for trial. CP then stipulated to denials on dates and times but did not want contempt finding. Court trial found CP in contempt and placed on community supervision. Make-up visitation provided. Both parties ordered to parent education. Compliance hearing set.



VIII. Parent Reactions to Project Services

Characteristics of Respondents in the Follow-Up Interview

To gauge parent reactions to materials sent to individuals in the low-level treatment group and services offered and delivered to individuals in the high-level treatment group, we conducted telephone interviews with noncustodial parents who enrolled in the project from April 2005 to September 2006. The interviews with noncustodial parents in both groups were conducted approximately six months after initial referral to the project. By January 2007, when field work ended, a total of 286 interviews were completed. The pool of completed interviews consisted of 203 interviews with parents in the high-level treatment group and 83 interviews with parents in the low-level treatment group. The average and median length of completed interviews was 27 and 25 minutes, respectively. Respondents received a \$20 Exxon gas card or a McDonald's gift certificate when they completed the interview. As previously noted, only 3 percent of targeted respondents refused to participate in the interview. Telephone disconnections, answer machines and wrong numbers were the chief reasons why 372 noncustodial parents could not be interviewed despite the fact that telephone researchers made up to eight phone attempts before reaching each respondent.

Table 22 presents some information on the noncustodial parents interviewed by telephone researchers. Those in the low and high-level treatment groups were equivalent on key demographic variables. They were overwhelmingly male, four-fifths lived relatively close to their children (50 miles or less), two-thirds to three-quarters were employed full time, and less than a third of each group reported annual household incomes of \$10,000 or less.

Table 22. Selected Characteristics of Parents Interviewed, by Treatment Group

	High Treatment (n=203)	Low Treatment (n=83)
Percent male	96%	99%
Percent employed full-time	74%	67%
Percent with annual household income below \$10,000 per year	23%	30%
Percent who live less than 50 miles from their children	83%	89%

Respondents in the two groups were also quite equivalent with respect to their parental status and their relationships with the other parent. For example, they both had an average of 1.3 or 1.4 children who typically lived with their mothers, and an identical one-fifth reported that physical violence had occurred in their relationship. Among the differences between the two groups were a higher rate of marriage for those in the high-level treatment group and a higher rate of cohabitation among those who never married (66% versus 43%) (see Table 23).

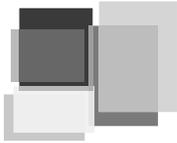


Table 23. Relationships with the Other Parent and the Children Reported by Interviewed Noncustodial Parents, by Group

	High Treatment (N=192)	Low Treatment (83)
Custody of children with the mother	80%	90%
Average number of children have with the other parent	1.3	1.4
*Ever married to the other parent	30%	22%
*Never married to the other parent	70%	78%
*Of those never married, percent lived together with other parent	66%	43%
Physical violence reported in the relationship	21%	19%

*Chi square is significant at .1.

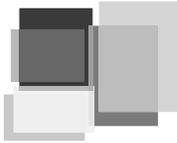
Project participants were assigned to the high and low-level treatment groups on a random basis, and those in the low-level treatment group were mailed a package of materials about visitation issues and community resources. Given the greater number of mailings to noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group, it is perhaps not surprising that these parents were significantly more likely to recall hearing about the DRO from a letter in the mail. Harris County residents can apply for visitation enforcement services at the DRO on a fee-for-service basis. A consultation with an attorney and a parent conference each cost \$50. Litigation costs can vary with the type of lawsuit that the DRO files.

Nearly half of those who were interviewed by telephone researchers in both groups recalled learning about the DRO and the resources it offered from someone at the child support agency. As previously noted, when mass mailings to delinquent obligors proved to be an inadequate source of referrals, it was decided to request that child support workers provide information about the project to noncustodial parents who raised the issue of visitation or access in phone conversations or face-to-face meetings about child support. Only a handful of parents in both groups recalled learning about it from someone at the court. While some child support attorneys distributed project literature at hearings, the courts were not heavily involved with referrals, and some child support managers felt as though parents with legal actions should not be referred (see Table 24).

Table 24. How Interviewed Noncustodial Parents Heard About the Project and the Domestic Relations Office, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
*Heard about where to get help from		
Someone at the court	5%	7%
A letter in the mail	11%	20%
Someone at Child Support	47%	48%
Other	38%	26%
Number	(191)	(82)

*Chi square is significant at .1.



Parent Reactions to Various Services Designed to Help with Access and Visitation

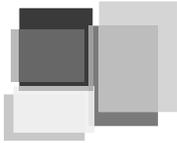
Printed Information: Is printed information about visitation issues and the resources available to address these problems perceived to be useful by noncustodial parents? Table 25 shows that an identical 86 percent of parents in both the high- and low-level treatment group recalled receiving printed information about access and visitation or the DRO either through the mail or during a personal visit to the DRO. Asked to rate the helpfulness of printed information, however, members of the high-level treatment group were significantly more apt to report that it was “very helpful” (42% versus 30%). This suggests that printed information alone is less effective than written materials that are accompanied by an oral explanation and/or additional services, although it is noteworthy that 69 percent it at least somewhat helpful.

Table 25. Responses of Noncustodial Parents to Mailed or In-Person Information on Access and Visitation, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
Percent reported receiving information from Domestic Relations Office or got information mailed to them about access and visitation	86%	86%
Number	(201)	(83)
Of those who received information, level of helpfulness of information received		
Very helpful	42%	30%
Somewhat helpful	35%	39%
Not helpful	23%	31%
Number	(171)	(70)

Table 26 considers the actions that parents reported taking based on the printed information they received from the DRO, either through mailed or in-person formats. The responses of noncustodial parents in the low- and high-level treatment groups suggest remarkable similarity in reported follow-up actions by parents. Nearly half of those interviewed in both groups said that they had sent a letter to the other parent indicating their intent to visit (41% versus 44%). An identical 63 percent of both groups reported that they were using a variety of visitation “tips” designed to make the visits go better. A slightly higher (but statistically identical) proportion of parents in the high-level treatment group (61% versus 50%) reported that they began to keep a visitation journal recording their attempts to visit and the response of the other parent. Eighty-one percent of respondents in both groups said that they better understood what their order said and when they were supposed to visit.

Parents in both groups rated the helpfulness of these suggestions in a similar manner. Getting a better understanding of their orders and when they were supposed to visit was judged to be the



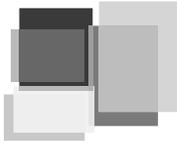
most helpful intervention, with more than half of responding parents in both groups characterizing it as “very helpful.” To contrast, only 26 to 30 percent of parents in either group said that it had been “very helpful” to send the other parent a letter declaring their intent to visit.

DRO staff concur that most parents are confused about standard possession orders. In their view, orders are more nuanced than the public realizes. As one respondent put it, “What’s out there is the perception that the visiting parent must get every other weekend.” They see great value in the efforts they make to explain standard possession and dispel myths about it.

Table 26. Actions Taken by Noncustodial Parents and Their Perceived Helpfulness Based on Printed Information about AV Resources, by Group

Percent reporting		High Treatment	Low Treatment
Sent other parent a letter saying you were going to visit	Number	41% (172)	44% (71)
Level of helpfulness	Very helpful	30%	26%
	Somewhat helpful	27%	29%
	Not helpful	43%	45%
Used visitation tips to make visits go better	Number	63% (171)	63% (71)
Level of helpfulness	Very helpful	48%	31%
	Somewhat helpful	32%	47%
	Not helpful	20%	22%
Started keeping a visitation journal	Number	61% (172)	50% (70)
Level of helpfulness	Very helpful	53%	49%
	Somewhat helpful	27%	17%
	Not helpful	21%	34%
Understand your order better and when to visit	Number	81% (169)	81% (69)
Level of helpfulness	Very helpful	62%	54%
	Somewhat helpful	25%	25%
	Not helpful	13%	21%

Some child support staff thought that the threat of getting help from the DRO and the court might in and of itself persuade many custodial parents to accommodate the visitation requests of petitioning parents. Table 27 shows that noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group



were significantly more likely to tell the other parent that they were planning to get help from the DRO and were considering going to court for relief. When attempted, these strategies yielded improved visitation outcomes for 28 percent of noncustodial parents in both high- and low-level treatment groups. They had no impact at all in half the cases, and they led to a deterioration of the visitation situation for about a fifth of the parents in both groups (see Table 27). As with child support, the threat of an enforcement action produces changes for a segment of the population.

Table 27. Perceived Reactions of Custodial Parents to the News that Noncustodial Parents were Getting Help From Domestic Relations Office, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
*Percent reported telling the other parent they were planning to get help from the Domestic Relations Office or court for their access and visitation problem	53%	35%
Number	(201)	(83)
Of those who told the other parent, situation became		
Better	28%	28%
Worse	27%	17%
No change	45%	55%

*Chi square is significant at .01.

Using the Internet to Communicate about Visits: Parents in both the high- and low-level treatment groups were given a flier for a free, year-long subscription to KidsnCommon, which is an Internet-based system of communicating with the other parent to schedule visits and discuss how the children will be exchanged. Naturally, it requires that both parents be computer literate and have home computers with an Internet capability. With few exceptions, this option was not pursued. Only 17 percent of parents in the high-level treatment group and 7 percent of those in the low-level treatment group recalled receiving information on KidsnCommon, and only three noncustodial parents ultimately tried it. The chief reason for not trying the website was the lack of a computer with Internet access at home by the respondent or the other parent. Too few respondents tried KidsnCommon to rate its utility.

Table 28. Parent Reactions to Internet-Based Communications About Visitation, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
*Percent reported receiving information on KidsnCommon	17%	7%
Number	(201)	(82)
Percent reported trying the website	9%	0%
Number	(34)	(0)

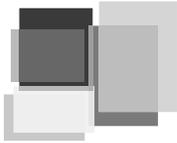


Table 28. Parent Reactions to Internet-Based Communications About Visitation, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
Of those who did not try the website, reason why not		
Do not have a computer with Internet access at home	42%	67%
Other parent does not have a computer with Internet access at home	28%	50%
The program looked too hard to use	0%	0%
Did not understand what the program was supposed to do	10%	17%
Do not want to communicate by computer	23%	0%
Number	(31)	(6)

*Chi square is significant at .05.

Parent Education Classes: Parents in both the high- and low-level treatment groups received a voucher to attend a class offered by the Escape Family Resource Center at no charge. The four-hour, single-session class was offered on Saturdays. It focused on methods of communicating with the other parent in a nonadversarial manner, the importance of parental involvement in the lives of their children, and age-appropriate visitation and parenting arrangements. Parents in the low-level treatment group received a program brochure and voucher in the mail. Parents in the high-level treatment group were referred to the program and given a voucher by attorneys who conducted conferences and facilitators who conducted parent conferences.

Table 29 shows that only half of the parents in the low-level treatment group recalled receiving a voucher to attend a Parents Forever class, and that this was the case for less than a third of those in the high-level treatment group. Attendance was extremely sparse, with only 9 percent of those in the high-level treatment group and 4 percent of those in the low-level treatment group reporting participation. Many parents in both groups maintained that they did not know about the class or that it was not offered at a convenient time. Still others cited transportation problems or a lack of time to attend. The 16 parents in the high-level treatment group who attended the class rated it favorably, with 56 percent terming it “very helpful” and most of the rest characterizing it as “somewhat helpful.” Since only three members of the control group attended the class, it was impossible to reliably assess their reactions to it.

Most voluntary parent education programs have great difficulty attracting participants, even if the programs enjoy high ratings of user satisfaction (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). To combat low attendance rates, many courts require that divorcing parents with minor-aged children attend education classes before they will act on divorce petitions. This requirement is not easily transferable to the never-married population, which lacks a comparable action involving both parties that is pending before the court.

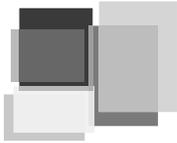
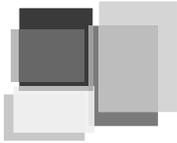


Table 29. Parent Reactions to Opportunity to Attend Parent Education Class, by Group

		High Treatment	Low Treatment
Percent reporting:			
*Received a voucher to attend a Parents Forever class		31%	51%
	Number	(201)	(81)
Attended Parents Forever class		9%	4%
	Number	(201)	(81)
If did not attend class, reason why not			
	Did not think it would help	14%	12%
	Did not think I needed it	15%	14%
	*Did not have the time	22%	39%
	*No transportation	8%	15%
	*Not held at a time I could go	13%	42%
	*Did not know about the class	62%	37%
	Number	(184)	(78)
Percent reported other parent attended parents forever class		31%	40%
	Number	(16)	(5)
Percent reported went to some other parent education class		16%	20%
	Number	(19)	(5)
Percent reported other parent attended some other parent education class		21%	25%
	Number	(14)	(4)
Overall satisfaction with class			
	Very satisfied	56%	33%
	Somewhat satisfied	31%	0
	Somewhat dissatisfied	6%	0
	Very dissatisfied	6%	67%
	Number	(16)	(3)
*Chi square is significant at .05.			

Attorney Consultations: All noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group could meet with a DRO attorney for a free consultation. Since other studies of noncustodial parents with visitation problems find that greater access to attorneys and the legal system is a key desire held by parents (Pearson and Thoennes, 1998), it is surprising that many parents did not take advantage of this opportunity. Among surveyed noncustodial parents, two-thirds met with an attorney and one-third did not.

Half of those who did not meet with an attorney maintained that they did not know it was available. This underscores the difficulty in communicating with noncustodial parents about helpful resources. Other common reasons for not pursuing a free session with an attorney were



not thinking it would help (25%), not having the time (19%), lacking transportation (11%), and/or getting an appointment at an inconvenient time (see Table 30).

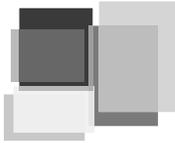
Table 30. Reactions of Noncustodial Parents to Opportunity to Meet with DRO Attorneys

Met with attorney at Domestic Relations Office		67%
	Number	(197)
If did not meet with attorney, reason why not		
	Did not think it would help	25%
	Did not think I needed it	9%
	Did not have the time	19%
	No transportation	11%
	Not held at a time I could go	19%
	Did not know about it	52%
	Number	(138)

Table 31 shows that parents who met with attorneys recalled discussing a variety of issues, the chief ones being the problems they were having with visitation, what their visitation order said and meant, and how the visitation enforcement process works. Many parents found all the topics discussed in the consultation to be very helpful, although the items that received the highest rating were how to keep a visitation diary, how parents' behavior affects children, and what would probably happen if they went to court. More than 60 percent of respondents rated these items as "very helpful." The topics that were regarded as unhelpful by at least a quarter of responding parents were those dealing with how to talk with the other parent and suggestions on how to make visits go better.

Table 31. Topics Discussed in Attorney Consultation and Their Helpfulness, as Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group (N=132)

	Percent Discussed	If Discussed, Level of Helpfulness		
		Very	Somewhat	Not
Problems you are having with visitation	99%	47%	35%	19%
Your child support case and payments	65%	39%	38%	24%
What your visitation order says and means	95%	53%	31%	16%
How to keep a visitation diary	78%	65%	24%	11%
How to talk with the other parent	69%	41%	30%	29%
How parents' behavior affects the children	76%	61%	25%	14%
How the visitation enforcement process works	92%	49%	31%	20%
What would probably happen if you went to court	79%	61%	21%	18%
Suggestions on how to make visits go better	74%	53%	22%	25%



Not surprisingly, those who met with DRO attorneys were either very (46%) or somewhat (31%) satisfied with the experience. Dissatisfied parents might have been told they were poor candidates for litigation or were frustrated by the steps they needed to take to obtain relief in the court system. As previously noted, many prior studies of mediation, visitation enforcement programs, parent education programs, and visitation hotlines find that noncustodial parents hunger for an opportunity to talk with lawyers and are frustrated by their lack of understanding of and access to the court system (Pearson, *et al.*, 1996; Center for Policy Research, 2004).

Table 32. Overall Satisfaction With Attorney Consultation (N=131)

Very satisfied	46%
Somewhat satisfied	31%
Somewhat dissatisfied	11%
Very dissatisfied	13%

Parent Conferences: The parent conference is a free, facilitated meeting with both parents aimed at identifying and addressing problems with visitation. Approximately one-third (37%) of interviewed parents in the high-level treatment group reported participating in a parent conference that was attended by both parents. The chief reasons parents in the high-level treatment group gave for not participating were not knowing about it (51%) and not being able to get the other parent to attend (42%). Since all members of the high-level treatment group received appointments for an attorney consultation, it is unclear why so many were ignorant. As previously noted, it is difficult to communicate with noncustodial parents about no-cost services for visitation problems, even when there is a remedial program designed to address those issues. It is also difficult to compel the custodial parent to attend remedial interventions such as a parent conference, which is one reason the DRO includes litigation as an option (see Table 33).

Table 33. Participation in the Parent Conference Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group

Percent reported both parents attended Parent Conference		37%
	Number	(198)
If did not attend, reason why not		
Did not think it would help		11%
Did not think I needed it		8%
Did not have the time		9%
No transportation		7%
Not held at a time I could go		11%
Did not know about it		51%
Other parent would not go		42%
	Number	(125)

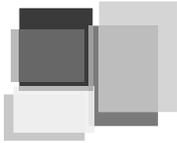


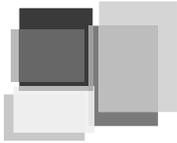
Table 34 describes the experiences of parents who participated in parent conferences. Most attended a single session, although 47 percent (35 participants) attended two. Three-quarters reported reaching an agreement with the other parent. This is comparable to rates of agreement making commonly reported in other mediation programs that serve both court and child support populations. For example, an evaluation of mediation programs funded by State Access and Visitation Grants found that 67 to 69 percent of participants at the sites reached agreements (Pearson, Davis and Thoennes, 2004). An evaluation of State Access and Visitation Grant programs conducted by the Office of the Inspector General found that 76 percent of the parents who mediated at four of the programs it studied produced an agreement (OIG, 2002). Finally, 72 percent of the noncustodial parents referred to mediation by child support workers in San Mateo County as part of the agency’s responsible fatherhood program produced an agreement (Pearson, *et al.*, 2003).

Half of the parents who reached an agreement in mediation termed it “very helpful,” and a quarter characterized it as “somewhat helpful.” Overall satisfaction with the parent conference reflected these patterns as well, with nearly half of all participants (those who reached agreements as well as those who did not) classifying themselves as “very satisfied” and another 21 percent saying that they were “somewhat satisfied.” These are comparable to rates of user satisfaction reported in more than two decades of research on divorce mediation which has been shown to be a useful adjunct to courts (Kelly, 1996; Pearson, 1994).

Table 34. Description of Parent Conferences and Outcomes for Participants in the High-Level Treatment Group

Percent who reached an agreement with the other parent	Number	75% (73)
If reached an agreement, level of helpfulness		
	Very helpful	51%
	Somewhat helpful	24%
	Not helpful	26%
Overall satisfaction with Parent Conference		
	Very satisfied	46%
	Somewhat satisfied	21%
	Somewhat dissatisfied	13%
	Very dissatisfied	21%
	Number	(72)

According to participants, the most common topics discussed in the parent conference were the visitation order (95%), the specific times and places that visitation would occur (85%), how to deal with the other parent and better communicate (81%), and the child’s safety during visits



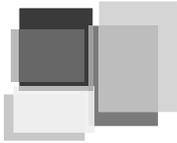
(76%). The topics that were rated by participants to be “very helpful” dealt with ways to help the child enjoy visits (70%), the child’s safety during visits (62%), the visitation order (59%), ideas about what to do during visits (57%), and specific times and places for visitation (55%) (see Table 35).

Table 35. Topics Discussed in Parent Conference and Their Helpfulness, As Reported By Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group (N=73)

	Percent Discussed	If Discussed, Level of Helpfulness		
		Very	Somewhat	Not
The visitation order	95%	59%	25%	16%
Child support	51%	43%	32%	24%
Specific times and places for visitation	85%	55%	26%	19%
Changes to a visitation plan already in place	51%	43%	38%	19%
How to deal with/better communicate with other parent	81%	43%	26%	31%
New partners and their role	42%	38%	28%	35%
The child’s safety during visits	76%	62%	28%	9%
Ideas about how to help your child enjoy visits	54%	70%	19%	11%
Tips or ideas about co-parenting	36%	44%	48%	8%
Ideas about what to do during visits	44%	57%	30%	13%

Going to Court: A final step that project participants could take to try to improve their visitation situation was to go to court. This was rarely undertaken. Only 12 percent of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group and 16 percent of those in the low-level treatment group reported that they had gone to court about an access and visitation problem. A substantial proportion of parents who went to court (39%) reported getting makeup visitation time. At the same time, 31 percent of those in the high-level treatment group and 54 percent of those in the low-level treatment group reported that their case was rescheduled or they did not get anything as a result of going to court. According to DRO staff, court interventions typically involved contempt filings which may have led to a jail sentence and/or a fine, both of which were suspended if the custodial parent complied with the order. Still another possible outcome was the scheduling of a compliance hearing at a future date to monitor adherence to the court order.

Many parents with court experiences in both groups said that they were “very” or “somewhat” dissatisfied (55% and 46%). It was impossible to isolate the reactions of those who may have litigated with DRO attorneys or rule out the possibility that parents confused their court experiences with visitation with those dealing with child support. Other studies also find that court experiences are less satisfying to users than mediation and other nonadversarial interventions (Pearson, 1999). Clearly, going to court about access and visitation issues in the



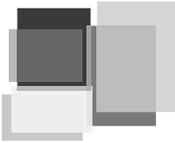
Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project was less gratifying than participating in parent conferences and/or attending consultations with an attorney at the DRO.

Table 36. Outcomes Reported by Noncustodial Parents Who Go To Court, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
Percent reported went to court about access and visitation problem		
Yes	12%	16%
No	88%	82%
In Progress	1%	2%
Number	(200)	(83)
If went to court, what happened		
Got makeup visitation time	39%	15%
Need to go to parent classes	4%	8%
Need more proof of visit denial	4%	0
Case was continued or rescheduled	9%	23%
Did not get anything	22%	23%
Other	35%	31%
Number	(23)	(13)
*Overall level of satisfaction with court		
Very satisfied	32%	23%
Somewhat satisfied	14%	31%
Somewhat dissatisfied	9%	31%
Very dissatisfied	46%	15%
Number	(22)	(13)

*Chi square is significant at .1.

Other Services: At the end of the telephone interview, parents were asked whether they had used a variety of other services to attempt to resolve their access and visitation problems. They were also asked to assess their utility. Texas is unique in having a statewide telephone hotline, which addresses access issues and is staffed by attorneys at Northwest Legal Services. Information about the hotline was included in the packet of information mailed to noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group, and the interviews show that it was used by 42 percent of noncustodial parents in this group. This was significantly higher than the level of usage reported by parents in the high-level treatment group (23%). Both groups of parents reported similar reactions to the hotline, however, with 43 and 47 percent of users assessing it to be “not helpful.” This is consistent with detailed interviews with 132 users of the Texas Access and Visitation Hotline, many of whom expressed frustration with the noncase specific nature of the information provided by attorneys who field calls and their inability to provide legal advice (Center for Policy Research, 2004). It also tracks with the findings of the Hotline Outcomes Assessment Study, which involved interviews with 2000 callers to five legal hotlines, 48 percent



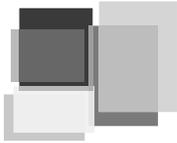
of whom were deemed by reviewing attorneys to have achieved unfavorable outcomes. More to the point, the highest rating of favorable outcomes and the highest rates of user satisfaction were reported by those who received brief services (Pearson and Davis, 2002; Echols and Gordon, 2002).

Although fewer parents in each group reported that they had checked out an access and visitation website developed by Northwest Legal Services with the support of the Office of the Attorney General, those who did gave it higher marks for usefulness, with a third of users characterizing it as “very helpful.” It is possible that those who visit a website for assistance expect to engage in self-help behaviors, while those who call a hotline expect to get specific answers to their questions and actions taken on their behalf.

Supervised visitation and supervised pick-up and drop-off services were used by about a quarter to a third of interviewed parents in each group. They too were judged to be “not helpful” by at least half of users in each group. This is consistent with a large-scale study of supervised visitation users that found that half the families that use such programs simply stop coming, making it impossible to determine whether they “outgrew” their need for supervision, stopped visiting their children totally, or engaged in unsupervised visits. In addition, many interviewed parents who used supervised visitation services felt as though the allegations that brought them into the program were never investigated or addressed (Pearson and Thoennes, 1997; Thoennes and Pearson, 1999).

Although fewer than 10 percent of interviewed noncustodial parents reported using mediation services with an entity other than the DRO, substantial proportions said that they had seen a private attorney, especially parents in the low-level treatment group (40% versus 29%). Approximately one-third of noncustodial parents in both groups rated their experiences with private attorneys as “very helpful.” Conversely, 28 to 42 percent of parents who used private attorneys in the two groups rated them as “not helpful.” These levels of satisfaction fell well below those reported by noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group who met with DRO attorneys, 46 percent of whom rated their encounters as “very helpful.”

Calling legal aid tended to be viewed as even less satisfactory. Approximately one-half of the interviewed noncustodial parents in each group reported that they had phoned legal aid for assistance with their access problem and two-thirds of both groups characterized the intervention as “not helpful” (see Table 37). Federal appropriations for legal services programs were slashed in 1982 and 1996. As a result, it is estimated that government-funded legal services plus private and *pro bono* services satisfy only about 20.5 percent of the total legal needs of Americans whose income falls below the poverty line (Spangenberg, *et al.*, 1989). Programs tend to handle relatively few family law matters and tend to restrict their coverage to cases that involve victims of domestic violence (Echols and Gordon, 2002; Pearson and Davis, 2002).



A majority of interviewed noncustodial parents in both groups (56% versus 69%) told interviewers that they wanted some other type of help. It is hard for noncustodial parents to get satisfactory outcomes to their visitation problems, but the proportion wanting some other type of help was significantly higher in the low-level treatment group.

Table 37. Other Access and Visitation Services Parents Received, by Group

Percent reporting		High Treatment	Low Treatment
*Phoned Access and Visitation Hotline	Number	23% (194)	42% (82)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	25%	15%
	Somewhat helpful	32%	38%
	Not helpful	43%	47%
Used supervised visitation	Number	25% (198)	33% (83)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	17%	15%
	Somewhat helpful	30%	22%
	Not helpful	53%	63%
Used supervised pick-up/drop-off	Number	29% (197)	28% (82)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	19%	30%
	Somewhat helpful	26%	17%
	Not helpful	54%	52%
Mediation with another program	Number	9% (196)	8% (83)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	12%	0
	Somewhat helpful	12%	29%
	Not helpful	77%	71%
*Hired a private attorney	Number	29% (195)	40% (82)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	33%	35%
	Somewhat helpful	26%	38%
	Not helpful	42%	28%
Called legal aid	Number	46% (191)	49% (83)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	14%	12%
	Somewhat helpful	22%	27%
	Not helpful	64%	61%

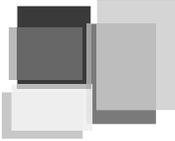
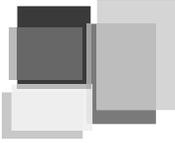


Table 37. Other Access and Visitation Services Parents Received, by Group

Percent reporting		High Treatment	Low Treatment
*Checked the AV website	Number	6% (195)	15% (83)
Level of helpfulness			
	Very helpful	33%	36%
	Somewhat helpful	42%	36%
	Not helpful	25%	27%
*Wanted some other type of help with AV problem	Number	56% (193)	69% (83)

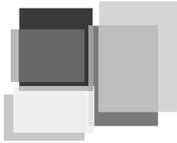
*Chi square is significant at .1.



Ensuring Access

Encouraging Support

Final Report



IX. Outcomes According to Project Participants

In addition to assessing user reactions to project services, the telephone interviews gauged whether participants in the high- and low-level treatment groups had experienced any changes in several relevant areas. These included levels of parent-child contact, relationships with the other parent, and child support payment patterns. Naturally, the outcome reports obtained in interviews were subjective assessments by the noncustodial parent and did not reflect the perceptions of the custodial parent. To obtain a more objective measure of outcome, we also assessed child support payments for project participants prior to and following their enrollment in the project based on records maintained by the Texas Office of the Attorney General. This analysis appears in the next section of the report.

Changes in Parent-Child Contact

Table 38 compares participant characterizations of the nature and frequency of contact between the noncustodial parent and the children prior to and following the receipt of project services. The table shows that respondents perceived few differences in contact patterns prior to and following their participation in the project, and that members of the high- and low-level treatment groups reported similar patterns of contact.

At both time points, the most common visitation arrangements reported by parents in both groups involved “regular, scheduled visits” and “no visits.” As to visitation frequency, the proportions reporting that they “never” see the children rose from 22 percent to 46 percent for members of the high-level treatment group, and 31 to 44 percent for members of the low-level treatment group. Asked to globally rate whether their access and visitation situation had improved, worsened, or stayed the same following assignment to the project, approximately one-third of respondents in each treatment group selected each of the three response categories.

Table 38. Changes in Parent-Child Contact Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group

	High Treatment		Low Treatment	
	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment
Visitation arrangement				
Regular, scheduled visits	31%	35%	30%	27%
Informal, not scheduled	33%	20%	30%	38%
No visits	37%	45%	40%	35%
Number	(193)	(193)	(83)	(83)

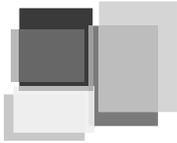


Table 38. Changes in Parent-Child Contact Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group

	High Treatment		Low Treatment	
	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment
How often NCP saw children:				
More than once a week	12%	13%	22%	11%
A few times a month	37%	32%	32%	29%
A few times year	29%	10%	15%	18%
Never	22%	46%	31%	44%
Number	(156)	(151)	(64)	(57)
Visitation situation compared to before project				
	N/A		N/A	
Improved	37%		31%	
Worse	29%		30%	
Stayed the same	34%		39%	
Number	(192)		(83)	

As previously noted, a third of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group did not participate in program services. When we separated these individuals and compared parent child-contact patterns for those who had participated in attorney consultations and/or parent conferences with their counterparts who had failed to appear for services, the picture changed. Most importantly, those that received services were significantly more likely to report improvements in their visitation situation following program enrollment as compared with their counterparts who did not pursue services. Nearly half (45%) of noncustodial parents who participated in attorney consultations and/or parent conferences reported improvements as compared with 15 percent of nonparticipants. Participants were also significantly more likely to report post-program visitation patterns that they characterized as “regular and scheduled” (40% versus 20%). They were much less likely to report that visitation “never” occurred (39% versus 62%). Thus, program interventions were associated with more frequent and regular parent-child contact arrangements that were perceived to have improved over time (see Table 39).

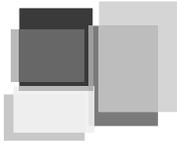


Table 39. Changes in Parent-Child Contact Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services

	Received Services		Did Not Receive Services	
	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment
Visitation arrangement		▲		▲
Regular, scheduled visits	29%	40%	35%	20%
Informal, not scheduled	35%	21%	24%	20%
No visits	36%	39%	41%	59%
Number	(139)	(139)	(54)	(54)
How often NCP saw children		▲		▲
More than once a week	13%	15%	7%	9%
A few times a month	39%	36%	34%	20%
A few times year	26%	10%	36%	9%
Never	21%	39%	23%	62%
Number	(112)	(106)	(44)	(45)
Visitation situation compared to before project		▲		▲
Improved	N/A	45%	N/A	15%
Worse		28%		32%
Stayed the same		27%		54%
Number		(138)		(54)

▲ Chi square between Received Services and Did Not Receive Services Post is significant at .05.

Changes in Parent Relationships

Table 40 shows how noncustodial parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups viewed their relationships with the other parent before and after they enrolled in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project. The only statistically significant difference between the two groups was parent assessments prior to enrollment in the program. Parents in the high-level treatment group were significantly more likely to term their relationships as “hostile, angry,” and less likely to characterize them as “cooperative.” This suggests that parent conferences might have been even more challenging for parents in the high-level treatment group. Although it appeared that the proportions that termed it as “hostile, or angry” dropped substantially, especially in the high-level treatment group, the groups gave statistically equivalent assessments of the status of their relationships after enrolling in the programs and members of both groups were most apt to say that they had stayed the same and not changed.

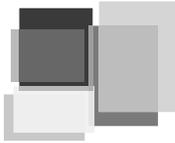


Table 40. Changes in Parental Relationships Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group

	High Treatment		Low Treatment	
	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment
Nature of relationship with the other parent	▲		▲	
Cooperative	28%	43%	38%	37%
Hostile, angry	46%	18%	27%	18%
No contact	27%	40%	35%	45%
Number	(191)	(192)	(82)	(83)
Compared to before project, relationship with other parent has				
Improved		25%		17%
Become worse		35%		37%
Stayed the same		40%		46%
Number		(191)		(83)

▲ Chi square is significant between High and Low Treatment Group prior to Program Enrollment at .05.

The picture on parental conflict changed considerably when we compared those in the high-level treatment group with their counterparts who neglected to meet with an attorney or participate in a parent conference. As in the analysis of parent-child contact patterns, there were significant differences between the two groups that favored parents who received project services. Table 41 shows that these parents were significantly more apt to report cooperative relationships with the other parent following program participation (48% versus 29%). They were significantly more likely to report that their relationship had improved (29% versus 15%) and less likely to say that it had become worse (28% versus 51%). Finally, they were significantly more likely to give the program credit for the relationship changes they had experienced (53% versus 27%).

Table 41. Changes in Parental Relationships Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services

	Received Services		Did Not Receive Services	
	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment
Nature of relationship with the other parent	▲		▲	
Cooperative	28%	48%	26%	29%
Hostile, angry	46%	14%	43%	27%
No contact	25%	38%	30%	44%
Number	(138)	(140)	(53)	(52)

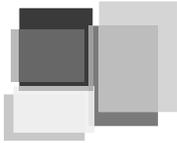


Table 41. Changes in Parental Relationships Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services

	Received Services		Did Not Receive Services	
	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment	Prior to program enrollment	Following program enrollment
*Compared pre-project, relationship with other parent				
Improved	29%		15%	
Become worse	28%		51%	
Stayed the same	43%		34%	
Number	(138)		(53)	
*Role of project in any relationship changes				
Major role	53%		27%	
Minor role	19%		12%	
No role	28%		61%	
Number	(79)		(33)	

^ Chi Square between Received Services and Did Not Receive Services Prior is significant at .05.

Changes in Child Support Payment Patterns: Parent Report

The last area of outcome we investigated dealt with the payment of child support. Noncustodial parents who were interviewed in the high and low-level treatment groups reported identical child support obligations with mean monthly orders of approximately \$350 per month. Their reports of payment were also equivalent with 74 and 64 percent of respondents in the high and low-level treatment groups, respectively, reporting that they were paying “everything” that they owed. Finally, a majority of respondents in each group reported that there had been no change in the regularity of their child support payments following their enrollment in the project (See Table 42).

Table 42. Changes in Payment of Child Support Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
Amount of support due per month		
Mean	\$361	\$349
Median	\$320	\$315
Range	\$90-1,500	\$94-876
Number	(189)	(82)

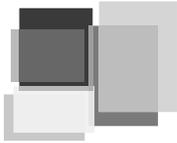


Table 42. Changes in Payment of Child Support Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents, by Group

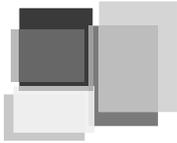
	High Treatment	Low Treatment
In the past few months, amount of child support paid that was due		
Everything	74%	64%
More than half	7%	10%
Something, but less than half	9%	12%
Nothing	8%	10%
Other	2%	4%
Number	(191)	(81)
Compared to before project enrollment, payment is		
More regular	20%	15%
About the same	71%	72%
Less regular	9%	14%
Number	(191)	(81)

As with other reported outcomes, those members of the high-level treatment who actually received services were significantly more likely to report favorable patterns following project participants than their counterparts who did not participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences. They were significantly more likely to report that they had paid “everything” that they owed in child support (78% versus 64%). They were also less apt to report that their payments had become less regular (6% versus 15%) (see Table 43).

Table 43. Changes in Child Support Payments Following Program Enrollment Reported by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services

	Received Services	Did Not Receive Services
*In the past few months, amount of child support paid that was due		
Everything	78%	64%
More than half	6%	10%
Something, but less than half	9%	11%
Nothing	5%	12%
Other	3%	2%
Number	(138)	(134)
*Compared to before project enrollment, payment is		
More regular	20%	16%
About the same	74%	69%
Less regular	6%	15%
Number	(138)	(134)

* Chi square is significant at .05.



X. Project Outcomes Based on Objective Records

Child support records maintained by the Texas Office of the Attorney General are the most reliable way to assess the obligations of noncustodial parents and their payment behavior. In January 2007, programmers at the OAG extracted information from the automated child support records on the child support status of all noncustodial parents who enrolled in the project prior to November 2006, and were assigned to either the high- or low-level treatment group. The computerized extract contained information on child support orders and arrears balances held by parents for the case for which they sought help with visitation, which is termed the “target case.” Since some parents had other child support cases that involved other children, the extract also included information on those obligations and arrears balances. In order to capture the full time frame of the project, we requested payment information for up to 18 months before and up to 18 months after the noncustodial parent pursued help with his visitation problem and enrolled in the project. Finally, we obtained information on enforcement actions taken by the OAG to compel noncustodial parents to pay their support and the source of payments including whether they were made by wage assignments and IRS intercepts.

The objective of our analysis was to determine whether noncustodial parents who were offered and obtained help with their visitation problems did a better job of paying their support obligations, and whether any improvements in payment could be attributed to their participation in the project, as opposed to the initiation of various enforcement actions available to the child support agency. Two recent studies have found that noncustodial parents who attempt to resolve their visitation problems and participate in mediation (OIG, 2002) and other access interventions (e.g., mediation, parent education and supervised visitation) (Center For Policy Research, 2006) pay more child support.

Changes in Child Support Payment Patterns: Child Support Records

Table 44 shows that approximately one-third of the obligors in both the high- and low-level treatment groups only had medical support orders when they sought help with their visitation problems and enrolled in the project for visitation help. Since these parents had no monthly support obligation, they were eliminated from the analysis of child support payment patterns. The remaining two-thirds with current support obligations owed approximately \$300 per month for child support, \$70 per month for past-due support, and had total arrears balances of approximately \$7,000. Only 12 percent of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group and 14 percent of those in the low-level treatment group owed no past due support and had no arrears (see Table 43).

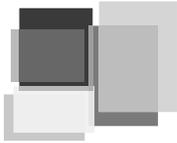
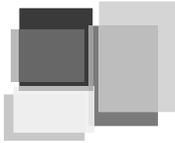


Table 44. Information on the Child Support Order for the Target Case Held by Noncustodial Parents at Project Enrollment, by Group

	High Treatment	Low Treatment
Order types		
Child support and arrears	63%	67%
Medical support only	37%	34%
Number	(380)	(200)
Amount of current support due monthly		
Mean	\$304	\$302
Median	\$260	\$270
Range	\$18-1,350	\$18-963
Number	(357)	(186)
Amount of arrears due monthly		
Mean	\$71	\$69
Median	\$50	\$50
Range	\$10-413	\$5-607
Number	(176)	(101)
Arrears balance		
Mean	\$7,212	\$6,961
Median	\$4,430	\$3,978
Range	\$1-68,723	\$11-90,874
Number	(323)	(161)
Percent of cases with no arrears	12%	14%
Number	(367)	(188)

To assess whether noncustodial parents with monthly support obligations did a better job of paying following their enrollment in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project, we calculated the percent of the obligation that they paid for the case that brought them into the project for visitation help. We obtained payment information for each parent for up to 18 months prior to and up to 18 months following their enrollment in the project. Dates of order establishment and project enrollment differed for each parent. Similarly, there was a different amount of time that elapsed between project enrollment and the generation of the child support extract in January 2007. On average, for both groups, there was approximately 15 months of payment activity to monitor prior to project enrollment, and approximately 12 months after enrollment. Thus, although the post-enrollment study period was significantly shorter than the length of time covered prior to enrollment, the time frames for cases in the high and low-level treatment groups were equivalent.

To ensure that we measured true differences in payment behavior rather than differences in the amount of time in our pre- and post-enrollment assessments, we standardized the measure of payment performance to reflect the average percent of payments made during the months preceding and following enrollment that were available for analysis. As previously noted, since the post-enrollment study period was shorter than the pre-enrollment study period, the total



amount of child support due during the post-enrollment study period was significantly lower for noncustodial parents in both groups (see Table 45).

On the standardized payment measure, however, only cases in the high-level treatment group registered significant improvement following program enrollment. Prior to enrolling in the project, noncustodial parents in this group paid an average of 73 percent of what they owed. During the months following their enrollment, they paid 86 percent of what they owed. In contrast, noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group paid a statistically identical 75 and 78 percent of what they owed during the pre- and post-enrollment time periods, respectively.

These findings are consistent with those reached by several evaluations of programs funded by State Access and Visitation Grants. For example, a study conducted by the Office of the Inspector General of 190 families in four states who received mediation services to deal with access problems found that 61 percent paid more child support (OIG, 2002). In a similar vein, a study conducted by the Center for Policy Research found that payments increased for parents who entered the access and visitation programs paying less than 100 percent of what they owed in child support, with increases occurring for 64 percent of mediation users, 93 percent of parent education clients, and 53 percent of supervised visitation clients. Among never-married parents, the increases were statistically significant, with the percent of owed child support that was paid following program participation rising from 59 to 79 percent (Center for Policy Research, 2006).

Table 45. Child Support Due and Paid in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment in the Target Case, by Group

	High Treatment (N=360)		Low Treatment (N=188)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Total amount due				
Mean	*\$4,051	^*\$3,481	**\$4,247	^**\$3,116
Median	\$3,600	\$2,900	\$3,780	\$2,772
Range	\$85-20,520	\$338-13,680	\$225-15,768	\$440-10,512
Total amount paid				
Mean	*\$3,215	*\$2,847	**\$3,280	**\$2,542
Median	\$2,634	\$2,290	\$2,732	\$2,028
Range	\$0-17,637	\$0-12,600	\$0-17,704	\$0-11,904
Average percent of MSO due that was paid	*73%	*86%	75%	78%
Number	(357)	(357)	(183)	(183)
Average number of months of payment on the case	* 14.8	* 11.9	** 15.3	**10.7
Average monthly amount due	* \$282	* \$308	** \$290	** \$310
Number	(312)	(312)	(164)	(164)

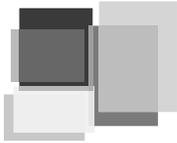


Table 45. Child Support Due and Paid in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment in the Target Case, by Group

	High Treatment (N=360)		Low Treatment (N=188)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Average monthly amount paid	* \$211	* \$243	**\$209	**\$249
Number	(313)	(313)	(167)	(167)
Percent paying nothing	9%	10%	8%	6%
Percent paying 1-25%	9%	10%	12%	9%
Percent paying 26-50%	12%	7%	15%	10%
Percent paying 51-75%	18%	11%	10%	11%
Percent paying 76-99%	21%	31%	20%	35%
Percent paying 100%	31%	31%	36%	29%
Number	(360)	(363)	(186)	(185)

* T-test between High Treatment Pre and Post is significant at .01.

** T-test between Low Treatment Pre and Post is significant at .05.

^ T-test between High Treatment Post and Low Treatment Post is significant at .05.

Child support agencies frequently use aggressive enforcement actions to obtain payments. Indeed, a recent study of the impact of an employment program in Tarrant County, Texas, found that improvements in child support payment following program participation were due to the use of enforcement actions imposed on the group referred to the employment program rather than increases in employment and earnings (Center for Policy Research, 2006). To determine whether noncustodial parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups had been subject to enforcement actions and whether this could perhaps explain the better payment performance for the high-level treatment group, we compared the different ways parents in the two groups had paid their child support during the periods prior to and following their enrollment in the project. We also examined the proportion of cases with the most commonly used enforcement actions: contempt actions and driver’s license suspensions.

Table 46 suggests that noncustodial parents in both treatment groups and at both time points almost never experienced any enforcement actions, and that there were few changes in the method by which they paid their child support. For both groups and at both time points, wage withholding was the most typical method of payment. Federal tax refunds were applied to payments in about a third of the cases in both groups during the months prior to enrollment and 22 percent of the cases following enrollment. Tax refund offsets are seasonal; the decline probably reflects the fewer number of months covered in the post-enrollment assessments. The proportion of cases with regular payments also dropped during the post-program assessment in both groups, although they remained significantly higher for cases in the low-level treatment group.

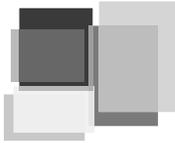


Table 46. Source of Child Support Payments Made by Noncustodial Parents and Enforcement Actions in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment in the Target Case, by Group

	High Treatment (N=360)		Low Treatment (N=188)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Payment made by				
Federal tax refund	32%	22%	37%	22%
Regular payment	48%	▲22%	47%	▲31%
Unemployment benefits	16%	9%	11%	9%
Wage withholding	75%	81%	71%	76%
Enforcement actions				
Percent of cases with enforcement action (court contempt or driver's license suspension)	0.9%	0.7%	0.4%	0.0%

▲ Chi square between High and Low Treatment groups Post is significant .05.

Table 47 repeats the analysis of payment patterns in target cases for noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group but compares those who participated in attorney consultations and parent conferences with those who failed to utilize the services offered by the DRO. It shows that parents who received services were responsible for the significant increase in payments for the high-level treatment group, and that their counterparts in the group that neglected to pursue project services did not improve their payment performance. Prior to enrolling in the project, noncustodial parents who received services paid an average of 73 percent of what they owed and this proportion rose to 88 percent during the months following their enrollment. Parents who neglected to participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences paid 75 percent of what they owed before enrolling in the project, and while this rose to 81 percent in the months following project enrollment, the increase was not statistically significant.

Table 47. Child Support Due and Paid in the Target Case in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment for Parents in High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services

		Received Services		Did Not Receive Services	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Total amount due					
	Mean	\$4,110	\$3,936	**\$3,965	**\$2,813
	Median	\$3,600	\$3,419	\$3,587	\$2,340
	Range	\$140-20,520	\$384-13,680	\$85-16,740	\$338-10,440
	Number	(213)	(216)	(147)	(147)

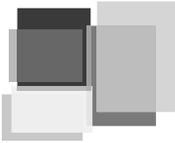


Table 47. Child Support Due and Paid in the Target Case in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment for Parents in High-Level Treatment Group, by Receipt of Services

	Received Services		Did Not Receive Services	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Total amount paid				
Mean	\$3,197	\$3,332	**\$3,241	**\$2,149
Median	\$2,700	\$2,883	\$2,483	\$1,586
Range	\$0-17,637	\$0-12,600	\$0-16,740	\$0-11,580
Number	(213)	(216)	(147)	(147)
Average percent of MSO due that was paid	*73%	*88%	75%	81%
Number	(213)	(213)	(147)	(147)
Average number of months of payment on the case	*15.0	*13.4	**14.6	**10.0
Average monthly amount due	*\$288	*\$313	**\$273	**\$301
Number	(174)	(174)	(138)	(138)
Average monthly amount paid	*\$217	*\$255	**\$204	**\$227
Number	(174)	(174)	(139)	(139)
Percent paying nothing	7%	7%	11%	14%
Percent paying 1-25%	9%	7%	9%	13%
Percent paying 26-50%	13%	10%	11%	4%
Percent paying 51-75%	20%	12%	15%	10%
Percent paying 76-99%	23%	31%	19%	32%
Percent paying 100%	28%	33%	35%	27%
Number	(213)	(216)	(147)	(147)

* T-test between High Treatment Pre and Post is significant at .05.

** T-test between Low Treatment Pre and Post is significant at .05.

Noncustodial parents frequently have multiple child support cases and orders. Table 48 shows that those that enrolled in the project had up to three cases with an average of 1.4. The 87 and 52 parents in the high and low-level treatment groups, respectively, who had a second child support case in addition to their previously discussed target case owed approximately \$240 per month for current support and \$28 to \$40 for arrears. The one difference between the two groups was a statistically higher arrears balance among parents in the high-level treatment group. On average, noncustodial parents in this group owed \$10,199 for a second child support case, as compared with \$6,405 for parents in the low-level treatment group

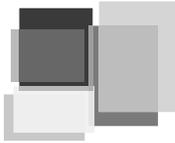


Table 48. Information on the Second Child Support Case for Noncustodial Parents With Two or More Cases, by Group

		High Treatment	Low Treatment
Number of cases on TXCSES			
	Mean	1.4	1.4
	Median	1.0	1.0
	Range	1-3	1-3
	Number	(375)	(197)
Amount of current support due monthly on case 2			
	Mean	\$244	\$239
	Number	(87)	(52)
Amount of arrears due monthly on case 2			
	Mean	\$42	\$28
	Number	(87)	(52)
Arrears balance on case 2			
	Mean	*\$10,199	*\$6,405
	Number	(85)	(50)

* T-Test between High and Low-Level Treatment Group is significant at .05.

Do the payment improvements observed among parents in the high-level treatment group for their target case extend to their other child support cases? Table 49 examines payment performance for parents in both groups who had a second child support case in the months prior to and following their enrollment in the project. The analysis shows that parents in the high-level treatment group had identical payment patterns prior to and following their enrollment in the project and that the improvements noted for their target case did not carry over to their second case. On average, during the 15 months prior to project enrollment, they paid 77 percent of what they owed for their second order. During the 12 months following their enrollment, they paid 75 percent of what they owed. Payments for parents in the low-level treatment group went from 86 to 84 percent during the same time periods.

Table 49. Child Support Due and Paid on the Second Child Support Case in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment, by Group

		High Treatment		Low Treatment	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Total amount due on case 2					
	Mean	*\$3,625	*\$3,163	**\$4,093	**\$2,364
	Number	(68)	(68)	(45)	(45)
Total amount paid on case 2					
	Mean	\$2,888	\$2,330	**\$3,552	**\$2,034
	Number	(71)	(71)	(45)	(45)
Total average percent of MSO due that was paid on case 2					
		77%	75%	86%	84%
	Number	(64)	(64)	(44)	(44)

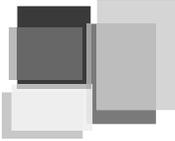
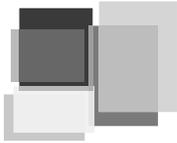


Table 49. Child Support Due and Paid on the Second Child Support Case in the Months Prior To and Following Project Enrollment, by Group

	High Treatment		Low Treatment	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Average number of months of payment on case 2	*14.9	*11.9	**15.5	**11.2
Average monthly amount due on case 2	*\$283	*\$301	\$285	\$259
Number	(52)	(52)	(34)	(34)
Average monthly amount paid on case 2	\$205	\$216	**\$239	**\$216
Number	(56)	(56)	(34)	(34)

*T-test between High Treatment Pre and Post is significant at .1.

** T-test between Low Treatment Pre and Post is significant at .1.



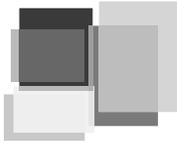
XI. Summary and Conclusions

The Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project aimed to promote the payment of child support by offering noncustodial parents in Harris County a variety of services to resolve their access and visitation problems and promote parent-child contact. It was conducted by the Attorney General of Texas (OAG) in collaboration with the Harris County Domestic Relations Office (DRO), which has traditionally provided mediation and legal services to enforce Harris County court orders for parents on a fee-for-service basis. Although the Texas Family Code encourages frequent contact between the child and each parent and the Standard Possession Order is presumptive (Tex. Fam. Code Ann. §153.251(b), many parents do not understand standard possession orders and their visitation rights, nor are they able to enforce them.

For this project, the Harris County DRO agreed to provide parents with child support cases a variety of services aimed at enforcing their visitation orders at no charge to the parties. This included attorney consultations, parent conferences, and legal enforcement actions. During February 2005 to December 2006, two groups of noncustodial parents with cases in one of seven local support offices in Region 6 who disclosed that they had visitation problems were identified and randomly assigned to receive one of two different treatments. Those in the low-level treatment group were sent a resource package consisting of information about the statewide Access and Visitation Hotline and Website; a sample letter to send to the custodial parent about exercising possession; a voucher to attend a free, four-hour class on co-parenting offered by the Escape Family Resource Center; and a flier offering a free, one-year subscription to KidsnCommon, a website that allows parents with the requisite equipment and software to communicate about children and visitation exchanges via the Internet.

Parents in the high-level treatment group who contacted the DRO were offered: a free consultation with a DRO attorney to explain the visitation order and the enforcement process; a free conference with both parents conducted by a trained facilitator to attempt to reach an agreement about the visitation order; and, for eligible cases, free litigation services undertaken by DRO attorneys to enforce visitation orders. Parents were also offered a voucher to attend a free, four-hour class on co-parenting offered by the Escape Family Resource Center, and a flier offering a free one-year subscription to the KidsnCommon website.

The project evaluation conducted by the Center for Policy Research involved collecting and analyzing information generated from multiple sources: intake information gathered by DRO staff for noncustodial parents who disclosed visitation problems and were assigned to both the high- and low-level treatment group; intake information gathered by DRO staff for custodial parents in the high-level treatment group who could be reached by telephone; and data collection forms completed by DRO investigators, attorneys, and facilitators who met with noncustodial (and custodial) parents in the high-level treatment group that appeared for consultations and



conferences. Information on case outcomes came from several sources too: project records maintained by DRO staff; telephone surveys conducted by professional interviewers at the Public Opinion Laboratory (POL) of Northern Illinois University, with noncustodial parents in both the high- and low-level treatment groups approximately six months following their assignment to the treatment groups; and an extract of project cases drawn from the automated child support system containing information on child support payments made by noncustodial parents in the project prior to and following their enrollment.

Ultimately, 875 noncustodial parents enrolled in Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support during March 2005 to December 2006. A quarter of the parents (26%) were randomly assigned to the low-level treatment group, while 74 percent were assigned to the high-level treatment group. Subsequent analysis of the characteristics of parents assigned to the two groups revealed that they were statistically equivalent on key demographic, parental, and relationship dimensions. The project evaluation focused on demographic information on these participants as well as the nature of their visitation problems. For the 648 parents in the high-level treatment group, we also presented information on the characteristics of the 391 that participated in attorney consultations and the 168 that engaged in attorney consultations and parent conferences. They were contrasted with the 178 who declined to pursue services. In addition to considering the characteristics of parents who received services and those who failed to appear, we considered the types of services delivered, service attrition patterns, and outcomes.

Telephone interviewers with POL made up to eight attempts to contact and interview 662 individuals who enrolled in the project from March 2005 to September 2006. As an incentive for completing the 22-minute interview, respondents were offered a \$20 gift certificate from McDonald's or an Exxon gas card. Those who could not be reached by telephone were sent a postcard reminder and invited to phone POL. Ultimately, 286 interviews were completed, which represented a response rate of 43 percent. The refusal rate was only 3 percent.

In January 2007, programmers at the OAG generated an extract of selected information from the automated child support system, TXCSES, on 367 cases in the high-level treatment group and 188 cases in the low-level treatment group with current child support obligations. The extract included information on the status of the case when the noncustodial parent enrolled in the project, monthly order levels, and arrears balances. To determine whether project participation led to a change in child support payment behavior, the extract summarized payment information for each noncustodial parent for up to 18 months prior to and following project enrollment.

Table 50 summarizes the amount and type of information collected about parents in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project and used in the evaluation. It is followed with a presentation of key findings reached in the evaluation.

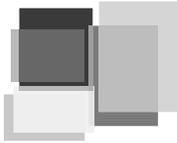


Table 50. Numbers of Project Participants with Information Collected at Different Stages of the Data Collection Process

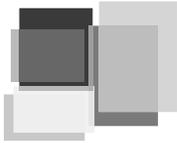
	High-Level Treatment Group	Low-Level Treatment Group
Information on Demographics, Parent-Child Contact, Visitation Problems, and Services Received for Noncustodial Parents with Visitation Problems who Enrolled in Project	646	229
Intake Information on Custodial Parents in High-Level Treatment Group who Participated in Services	230	0
Information on Consultations with DRO Attorneys by Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group	391	NA
Information on Parent Conferences with DRO Facilitators for Noncustodial and Custodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group	168	NA
Follow-up Telephone Surveys with Noncustodial Parents Who Enrolled in the Project	203	83
Child Support Obligations and Payment Patterns for Noncustodial Parents Who Enrolled in the Project and have Child Support Orders	368	188

Key Findings

Referral and Enrollment

Noncustodial parents are skeptical of an offer of help with visitation from the child support agency. It was challenging to engage noncustodial parents and overcome their doubts about an offer of help with visitation from the child support agency. Mass mailings to noncustodial parents with young children that included an offer for free services to address visitation problems were ineffective and yielded response rates of only 1 to 2 percent. It did not make a difference whether the letters were sent by the child support agency or the DRO, an agency dedicated to enforcing the visitation and child support terms of court orders generated in Harris County. It was more effective for child support workers to flag parents with problems when they called or visited the agency. The 21 month referral effort yielded 875 enrollments, the majority of which came from face-to-face referrals in child support offices.

Child support workers exercise discretion in the types of noncustodial parents they refer for visitation services and eliminate cases with new child support orders and those that involve pending legal action. While child support workers valued having a place to send parents with visitation problems and clearly engaged in referral activity, the number and type of parents who enrolled suggest that workers exercised a good deal of discretion and selection in making referrals. On average, parents referred to the project had child support orders that were at least 40 months old, only 10 percent had newer cases with orders of six months or less, and less than 1 percent had experienced a court contempt or driver’s license suspension during the 18 months prior to their enrollment in the project. Workers avoided making referrals in new cases with orders that were just being established and cases that involved pending legal action.



According to managers of child support offices, there was concern that routine referrals for visitation services when orders were being developed would create bottlenecks and slow down the establishment process. Still others feared that the enforcement of visitation would derail the process of enforcing child support.

Participant Characteristics

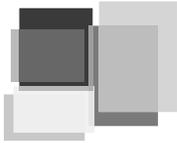
A wide variety of parents disclose visitation problems and enroll in a project offering remedial services. Noncustodial parents with a wide variety of characteristics disclosed visitation problems to child support workers and were referred to the DRO, where they were randomly assigned to the high- and low-level treatment groups.

As to demographics, participants were overwhelmingly male (97%), ranged in age from 18 to 61 years old, and had an average age of about 32. While half were African-American, a third was Latino and about 10 percent were Anglo. And while the majority had a high school diploma, identical proportions had no school degree at all or a college degree, respectively. More than two-thirds reported being employed full time for a full 12 months during the year prior to their enrollment. They reported incomes that ranged from less than \$10,000 to more than \$60,000 per year.

With respect to children, members of both treatment groups reported having one child that ranged in age from one to 17, with an average age of 6.3. About half lived less than 25 miles from their children. About a third reported that they did not know where their children lived at all. Finally, while about a fifth reported parent-child contact levels of every other week or more, more than a third reported no contact at all during the six months prior to enrollment.

Finally, with respect to parental relationships and marital status, parents who enrolled in the project were overwhelmingly likely to report being never married (75%), and most of those who were never married (53% and 61%) reported that they had lived together. Parents in both the low- and high-level treatment groups reported a wide range of relationships with the other parent with 10 percent characterizing it as “friendly,” 25 percent terming it as “a little strained,” 46 percent noting it as “very strained,” and about 19 percent reporting no contact at all.

Parents who seek help with visitation problems report higher education and employment levels than noncustodial parents in responsible fatherhood and employment programs, and some different family dynamics. While noncustodial parents who participated in visitation, responsible fatherhood, and employment programs shared similar age (32 years old) and racial characteristics (50% to 56% were African-American), they displayed some important differences. Compared to responsible fatherhood and employment programs, noncustodial parents who sought



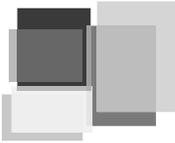
help with visitation problems were more highly educated and more apt to be employed on a full-time basis and less likely to be unemployed. As to family characteristics, they had fewer children and reported lower levels of parent-child contact than their counterparts in the other type types of programs. Given the fact that they wanted help with visitation problems, it is perhaps not surprising that they were more apt than noncustodial parents in responsible fatherhood and employment programs to report conflict with the other parent

Many parents with visitation problems who seek remedial services are involved with the criminal justice system and/or report domestic violence. Investigations of criminal justice records for Harris County revealed that 56 percent of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group had been arrested in Harris County, and 8 percent had been convicted of a felony. Nearly a fifth (17%) of those who participated in an attorney consultation revealed that the court had placed restrictions on their access to their children. A quarter (25%) expected that the other parent would probably disclose domestic violence. In actual fact, however, 49 percent of custodial parents interviewed by DRO staff disclosed being hit, slapped, or kicked by the noncustodial parent, and 27 percent reported being afraid of him.

Domestic abuse is a common problem in family law cases; programs have long grappled with methods of achieving safety in mediation programs to resolve custody and visitation disputes. Accordingly, agencies like the DRO have developed procedures to identify safety concerns and address them in parent conferences so that parent-child contact can be achieved along with safety.

Noncustodial parents report a variety of long-standing and entrenched problems with visitation. Noncustodial parents who enrolled in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project reported having a number of problems with visitation, the chief one being “not being allowed to see the children.” Other common problems were disagreements about what the visitation order says and not knowing where the children lived. On average, these problems had been going on for about 24 months. While a third of parents in the low- and high-level treatment group characterized their visitation problems as fairly recent, beginning only six months prior to project enrollment, a third of both groups said that the problem had been going on for 25 months or longer.

Noncustodial and custodial parents hold some similar views about their visitation situation, but characterize the problems in different ways. Custodial parents agreed with noncustodial parents about the duration of the visitation problems and the amount of parent-child contact that occurred in the year prior to project enrollment. They tended to characterize their visitation problems differently. While two-thirds of custodial parents complained that the other parent failed to stick to a regular visitation schedule and/or had patterns of missed or cancelled visits, these were believed to be major concerns for custodial parents by less than one-third of noncustodial parents who enrolled in the project. Another area of discrepancy had to do with the



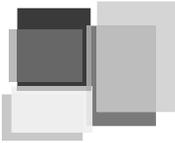
role of new partners in visitation problems. While 39 percent of noncustodial parents thought that this was a factor in their visitation situation, this was cited by only 13 percent of interviewed custodial parents. And while 26 percent of noncustodial parents thought that the other parent was confused about what the order said, this was expressed by only 12 percent of custodial parents. Custodial and noncustodial parents clearly interpret their visitation problems in different terms.

Noncustodial parents who were referred to and enrolled in the project tended to be child support payers, and a third had medical support orders only. Automated child support records show that during approximately 15 months prior to enrolling in the project for which payment activity was available, noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group paid an average of 73 percent of what they owed in child support, while noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group paid 75 percent. While almost 10 percent of parents in both groups paid nothing, approximately one-third were perfect payers who had paid 100 percent of their monthly support obligation. Payment performance in Region 6 as a whole stood at 61.7 percent in 2006, suggesting that at project entry, participants paid better than the average noncustodial parent in Region 6

Another characteristic that distinguished project participants was the high incidence of medical support orders. More than a third of noncustodial parents in each group (37% versus 34%) only had medical support orders and had no monthly support obligation. In 2006, only 18.1 percent of open child support cases in Harris County involved medical support orders. These patterns suggest that either the only types of parents with visitation problems who were willing to come forward and pursue help were payers and/or that child support workers exercised discretion in making referrals to the project and tended to send noncustodial parents who they felt were deserving of services — namely, those who were paying their child support.

Service Delivery

It is difficult to deliver remedial services to noncustodial parents who say that they have problems with visitation. A significant proportion of noncustodial parents failed to follow through with their request for help. While 391 of the 646 noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group ultimately met with a DRO attorney (60%), 255 did not (40%). Even though all members of the high-level treatment group were scheduled for an attorney consultation, 52 percent of those who were interviewed and neglected to meet with an attorney said that they did not know about it. Twenty-five percent did not think that it would help. Time factors were also cited as reasons for their failure to appear, including not having the time to meet (19%) and not having a meeting scheduled at a convenient time (19%).



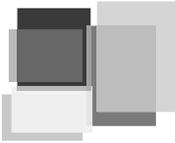
In a similar vein, only 168 (26%) of cases in the high-level treatment group wound up having a free parent conference with a DOR facilitator. Interviews with a sample of those who neglected to participate in the conference revealed that half (51%) maintained that they did not know about it, while nearly half (42%) said that the other parent would not cooperate. It is clearly difficult to help noncustodial parents and their former partners with visitation problems even when resources are available. More or different methods of service delivery need to be explored, including more passive, one-stop approaches that capitalize on the parent's appearance at the child support agency or the court for other matters.

Although legal enforcement procedures are rarely used, they are important components of the service menu. Eligible parents who exhausted other approaches to resolving visitation problems and met DRO criteria were offered free assistance with legal filings to enforce their visitation orders. Most cases settled and only six parents wound up filing motions in court to enforce their visitation orders. DRO staff maintained that cases settled at all stages of the referral and DRO treatment process, with some parents reporting that the mere threat of enrolling in the project had solved the problem. Still other cases were dropped from the litigation track because the applicant neglected to generate the necessary documentation. Staff felt that while some noncustodial parents were relieved to discover that there were steps they could take that might lead to relief in the court system, others found the requirements too burdensome.

When the DRO filed contempt motions, it almost always resulted in jail sentences and fines against the custodial parent that were suspended pending compliance with the order. Another common outcome was make-up visitation. Finally, the court routinely set a date for a hearing to monitor compliance with the visitation order. While legal enforcement procedures were rarely used and did result in filings that clogged the courts, project staff felt that they added a degree of equity and gravitas to the enforcement program.

Very few parents use voluntary, educational interventions dealing with visitation and co-parenting, even if they are offered free of charge. Parents in both the high- and low-level treatment group were both offered vouchers to attend a free, four-hour class on how to communicate and cooperate with the other parent. Based on follow-up interviews conducted with a sample of noncustodial parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups, however, only a fraction in each group (9% and 4%, respectively) attended the Parents Forever Class. Most respondents in the high-level treatment group (62%) maintained that they did not know about the class. This was the contention of 37 percent of respondents in the low-level treatment group. Other common reasons for not attending reported by interviewed noncustodial parents in both groups was having the class scheduled at an inconvenient time and/or not having the time to go.

These patterns are consistent with attendance patterns reported for parent education programs offered to divorcing couples. Although most parents that attend report satisfactory experiences,

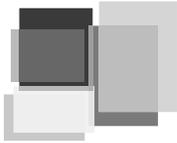


with 70 percent favoring a mandatory attendance policy (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999), voluntary programs struggle to obtain participants. To overcome this problem, 25 states mandated divorcing (and/or relitigating) parents to attend an approved parent education program and present a certificate of attendance to the court as evidence of their participation by 1998 (Clement, 1998; Geasler and Blaisure, 1998).

Very few parents use computerized methods to communicate about the children and schedule visitation exchanges. All parents in the low-level treatment group (and many in the high-level treatment group) were offered a free, one-year subscription to an Internet-based service for separated and divorce parents to communicate about their children and schedule visitation. While nearly half (45%) of noncustodial parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups reported having a computer with Internet access at home, only three noncustodial parents among those who were interviewed reported using the website. Most did not recall receiving information about the site. The chief explanation for not using the site offered by those who recalled hearing about it was the lack of a computer with Internet access at home by them or the other parent.

There are few demographic, child, or parental relationship characteristics reported by noncustodial parents that are associated with different levels of project participation, including the receipt of services and dropping out. Many noncustodial parents failed to take advantage of project services. Only 60 percent of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group participated in attorney consultations; 29 percent participated in both an attorney consultation and a parent conference. Nearly half (40%), neglected to make the phone calls or appearances needed to obtain project services.

Efforts to identify demographic, child, and parental relationship characteristics of parents who received and did not receive services, however, were largely unsuccessful. With the exception of higher levels of service utilization by Hispanics and noncustodial parents who owned home computers, none of the other demographic, family, or relationship variables was significantly associated with participation in attorney consultations and parent conferences. Those who were served and those who failed to pursue services had identical education, employment, and age characteristics. They characterized their relationships with the other parent in statistically identical terms and reported equivalent patterns of parent-child contact prior to enrolling in the project. Their visitation problems had been going on for approximately the same amount of time, and they reported similar marital status and cohabitation patterns.



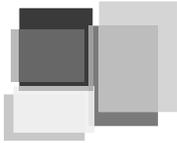
Reactions to Services

Although many parents value printed information, they are more apt to find it helpful if they get some in-person assistance, too. An identical 86 percent of parents in both the high- and low-level treatment group recalled receiving printed information about access and visitation or the DRO either through the mail or during a personal visit to the DRO. Although 69 percent found printed information alone at least somewhat helpful, members of the high-level treatment group were significantly more apt to report that it was “very helpful” (42% versus 30%). Conversely, members of the low-level treatment group were significantly more likely to term it “not helpful” (31% versus 23%). This suggests that printed information alone serves a customer services function but is perceived to be less effective than written materials that are accompanied by an oral explanation and/or additional services.

Parents who participate in consultations with DRO attorneys are very satisfied with the experience. Parents who met with attorneys recalled discussing a variety of issues, the chief ones being the problems they were having with visitation, what their visitation order said and meant, and how the visitation enforcement process works. Many parents found all the topics discussed in the consultation to be very helpful, although the items that received the highest rating were how to keep a visitation diary, how parents’ behavior affects children, and what would probably happen if they went to court. More than 60 percent of respondents rated these items as “very helpful.” The topics that were regarded as unhelpful by at least a quarter of responding parents were those dealing with how to talk with the other parent and suggestions on how to make visits go better.

Not surprisingly, those who met with DRO attorneys were either very (46%) or somewhat (31%) satisfied with the experience. As previously noted, many prior studies of mediation, visitation enforcement programs, parent education programs, and visitation hotlines find that noncustodial parents hunger for an opportunity to talk with lawyers and are frustrated by their lack of understanding of and access to the court system (Pearson and Thoennes, 1998; Center for Policy Research, 2004).

Parents who participate in parent conferences at the DRO are able to produce agreements and are very satisfied with the experience. Three-quarters of interviewed noncustodial parents that participated in a parent conference at the DRO reported reaching an agreement with the other parent. This is comparable to rates of agreement making commonly reported in other mediation programs that serve both court and child support populations. For example, an evaluation of mediation programs funded by State Access and Visitation Grants found that 67 to 69 percent of participants at the sites reached agreements (Pearson, Davis, and Thoennes, 2004). An evaluation of State Access and Visitation Grant programs conducted by the Office of the Inspector General found that 76 percent of the parents who mediated at four of the

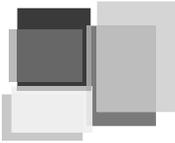


programs it studied produced an agreement (OIG, 2002). Finally, 72 percent of the noncustodial parents referred to mediation by child support workers in San Mateo County as part of the agency's responsible fatherhood program produced an agreement (Pearson, *et al.*, 2003).

Half of the parents who reached an agreement in mediation termed it "very helpful" and a quarter characterized it as "somewhat helpful." Overall satisfaction with the parent conference reflected these patterns as well, with nearly half of all participants (those who reached agreements as well as those who did not) classifying themselves as "very satisfied" and another 21 percent saying that they were "somewhat satisfied." These are comparable to rates of user satisfaction reported in more than two decades of research on divorce mediation that has been shown to be a useful adjunct to courts (Kelly, 1996; Pearson, 1994).

Parents are less satisfied with their experiences with private attorneys and legal aid. Calling legal aid tended to be viewed as considerably less satisfactory than other types of legal interventions. Approximately one-half of the interviewed noncustodial parents in each group reported that they had phoned legal aid for assistance with their access problem, and two-thirds of both groups characterized the intervention as "not helpful." Federal appropriations for legal services programs were slashed in 1982 and 1996. As a result, it is estimated that government-funded legal services plus private and *pro bono* services satisfy only about 20.5 percent of the total legal needs of Americans whose income falls below the poverty line (Spangenberg, *et al.*, 1989). Nationally, legal services programs tend to restrict their coverage to family law matters that involve victims of domestic violence (Echols and Gordon, 2002; Pearson and Davis, 2002).

Parents are more likely to use the Access and Visitation Hotline than the website, but give the website higher ratings of satisfaction. Texas is unique in having a statewide telephone hotline to address access issues that is staffed by attorneys at Northwest Legal Services. Information about the hotline was included in the packet of information mailed to noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group, and the interviews show that it was used by 42 percent of noncustodial parents in this group. This was significantly higher than the level of usage reported by parents in the high-level treatment group (23%). Both groups of parents reported similar reactions to the hotline, however, with 43 and 47 percent of users assessing it to be "not helpful." This is consistent with detailed interviews with 132 users of the Texas Access and Visitation Hotline, many of whom expressed frustration with the noncase specific nature of the information provided by attorneys who field calls and their inability to provide legal advice in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest (Center for Policy Research, 2004). It also tracks with the findings of the Hotline Outcomes Assessment Study, which involved interviews with 2000 callers to five legal hotlines, 48 percent of whom were deemed by reviewing attorneys to have achieved unfavorable outcomes. More to the point, the highest rating of favorable outcomes and the highest rates of user satisfaction were reported by hotline callers who received brief services as opposed to only information and/or referrals (Pearson and Davis, 2002; Echols and Gordon, 2002).



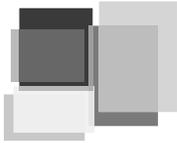
Although fewer parents in each group reported that they had checked out an access and visitation website developed by Northwest Legal Services with the support of the Office of the Attorney General, those who did gave it higher marks for usefulness, with a third of users characterizing it as “very helpful.” It is possible that those who visit a website for assistance expect to engage in self-help behaviors, while those who call a hotline expect to get specific answers to their questions and actions taken on their behalf.

Going to court is extremely satisfying for some parents but disappointing to most. A final step that project participants could take to try to improve their visitation situation was to go to court. This was rarely undertaken. Only 12 percent of noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group and 16 percent of those in the low-level treatment group reported that they had gone to court about an access and visitation problem. A substantial proportion of parents who went to court (39%) reported getting make-up visitation time. At the same time, 31 percent of those in the high-level treatment group and 54 percent of those in the low-level treatment group reported that their case was rescheduled or they did not get anything as a result of going to court. Approximately one-third of each group reported other outcomes to their court experiences that were not captured by telephone interviewers. According to DRO staff, the most common outcome was a contempt filing followed by a finding of contempt. This led to a jail sentence and/or a fine, both of which were suspended if the custodial parent complied with the order. Still another possible outcome was the scheduling of a compliance hearing at a future date to monitor adherence to the court order.

Many parents with court experiences in both groups said that they were “very” or “somewhat” dissatisfied (55% and 46%, respectively). We cannot rule out the possibility that parents confused their court experiences for visitation with those dealing with child support. Nor were we able to isolate the reactions of those who may have litigated using DRO attorneys. Other studies also find that court experiences are less satisfying to users than mediation and other non-adversarial interventions (Pearson, 1999). Clearly, going to court about access and visitation issues in the Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project was less gratifying than participating in parent conferences and/or attending consultations with an attorney at the DRO.

Outcomes

Noncustodial parents who participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences are significantly more likely to report improvements in their visitation situation. Although there were no differences in the patterns of parent-child contact following program enrollment reported by interviewed members of the high- and low-level treatment groups as a whole, those who participated in program services did experience benefits. In particular, those who received services, as compared with their counterparts who did not pursue services, were significantly

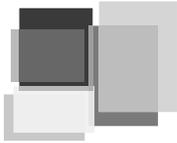


more likely to report more frequent and regular contact arrangements that were perceived to have improved over time. Nearly half (45%) of noncustodial parents who participated in attorney consultations and/or parent conferences reported improvements, as compared with 15 percent of nonparticipants. Participants were also significantly more likely to report post-program visitation patterns that they characterized as “regular and scheduled” (40% versus 20%). They were much less likely to report that visitation “never” occurred (39% versus 62%).

Noncustodial parents who participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences are significantly more likely to report improvements in their relationships with the other parent. While interviewed parents in both the high- and low-level treatment group gave statistically equivalent assessments of the status of their relationships with the other parent after enrolling in the program, the picture of parental conflict changed considerably when we compared those in the high-level treatment group with their counterparts who neglected to meet with an attorney or participate in a parent conference. As in the analysis of parent-child contact patterns, there were significant differences between the two groups that favored parents who received project services. Parents who received services at the DRO were significantly more apt to report cooperative relationships with the other parent following program participation (48% versus 29%). They were significantly more likely to report that their relationships had improved (29% versus 15%) and less likely to say that they had become worse (28% versus 51%). Finally, they were significantly more likely to give the program credit for the relationship changes they had experienced (53% versus 27%).

Parents in the high-level treatment group are significantly more likely to increase their payment of child support, with the most pronounced gains registered by those who participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences. Cases in the high-level treatment group registered significant improvement in payment following program enrollment. Prior to enrolling in the project, noncustodial parents in this group paid an average of 73 percent of what they owed. During the months following their enrollment, they paid 86 percent of what they owed. To contrast, noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group paid a statistically identical 75 and 78 percent of what they owed during the pre- and post-enrollment time periods, respectively.

Further analysis revealed that parents who participated in attorney consultations and parent conferences were responsible for the significant increase in payments for the high-level treatment group, and that their counterparts in the group that neglected to pursue project services did not improve their payment performance. Prior to enrolling in the project, noncustodial parents who received services paid an average of 73 percent of what they owed and this proportion rose to 88 percent during the months following their enrollment. Parents who neglected to participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences paid 75 percent of what they owed before enrolling in the project, and while this rose to 81 percent in the months following project enrollment, the increase was not statistically significant.

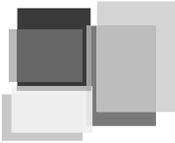


Improvements in child support payment for the high-level treatment group are not due to more aggressive enforcement actions. Both prior to and following project enrollment, noncustodial parents in both the high- and low-level treatment groups rarely experienced any enforcement actions, with less than 1 percent exhibiting a court contempt or driver's license suspension. Nor were there many changes in the method by which they paid their child support. For both groups and at both time points, wage withholding was the most typical method of payment. Federal tax refunds were applied to payments in about a third of the cases in both groups during the months prior to enrollment and 22 percent of the cases following enrollment. Tax refund offsets are seasonal; the decline probably reflects the fewer number of months covered in the post-enrollment assessments. The proportion of cases with regular payments also dropped during the post-program assessment in both groups, although they remained significantly higher for cases in the low-level treatment group.

Conclusions

The Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project reveals that the child support agency can collaborate with community agencies that are skilled in helping parents with visitation problems. The project also shows that the main services offered by the Domestic Relations Office — attorney consultations and parent conferences — are effective ways to help noncustodial parents with their problems. Both interventions inspire high levels of user satisfaction. Those who participate in these services report higher levels of parent-child contact and improvements in parental relationships. Finally, the project evaluation reveals that addressing visitation problems through interventions like attorney consultations and parent conferences is associated with significant improvements in child support payment. A review of child support records for noncustodial parents randomly assigned to lower- and higher-level treatment groups shows that members of the higher level treatment group pay a significantly higher proportion of what they owe. The biggest gains in payment are made by those who actually receive remedial services and participate in attorney consultations and parent conferences.

Many noncustodial parents report that printed information on visitation is at least somewhat helpful. Nevertheless, the lack of significant improvements in child support payments, parent-child contact patterns, and parental relationships for members of the low-level treatment group suggests that simply providing a packet of information on visitation problems and community resources to noncustodial parents is not the most effective way to address these problems. While written materials may serve a customer service function, agencies that wish to improve payments by addressing visitation problems will need to go beyond distributing printed information and actually provide services by trained personnel to achieve results.

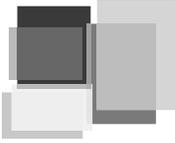


Identifying and serving noncustodial parents with visitation problems, however, is no simple task. Mass mailings do not work. After decades of being told that the child support agency does not handle visitation, noncustodial parents do not respond to letters by child support agencies or court agencies that promise help with this issue. It is far more effective for child support workers to spot parents with visitation problems in their caseload and make referrals, although workers are less apt to refer parents for help at early stages of order establishment and/or if they have pending enforcement actions. While we cannot be sure whether it was due to worker referral or parent response, there was a definite skew in the pattern of noncustodial parents and cases in the project. Most of the parents who enrolled in the project were child support payers with older orders; a third only had medical support orders and had no monthly support obligations. Compared with responsible fatherhood and employment programs sponsored by child support agencies, the Ensuring Access—Encouraging Support Project attracted noncustodial parents who reported higher levels of education and employment, lower levels of parent-child contact, and higher levels of conflict with the other parent.

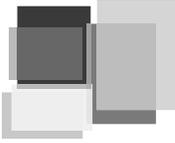
It was also difficult to deliver services to many of those who enrolled. Forty percent of targeted noncustodial parents did not take advantage of free attorney consultations; only 24 percent took advantage of free parent conferences with a DRO facilitator. Follow-up interviews revealed that half maintained that they did not know that attorney consultations and parent conferences were available, even though they were contacted by DRO staff and scheduled for attorney consultations. Many said that they did not participate in a parent conference because the other parent refused to cooperate.

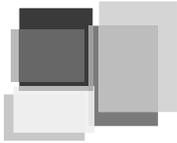
These problems are hardly new to child support agencies, which struggle to communicate with noncustodial parents and inform them of their status and a host of service options. Clearly, more or different methods of service delivery need to be explored for the delivery of visitation services. This might include more passive, one-stop approaches that capitalize on the parent's appearance at the child support agency or the court for other matters. The availability of on-the-spot visitation services might also improve participation by custodial parents, since many appear at the child support agency and/or court for order establishment and enforcement proceedings.

The Ensuring Access — Encouraging Support Project illustrates that child support agencies realize measurable payment benefits when they provide remedial services to noncustodial parents with visitation problems. Compared with responsible fatherhood and employment programs sponsored by the child support agency, the Ensuring Access—Encouraging Support Project served parents who tended to be somewhat better educated, employed, and pay their support at better than average rates. The project services triggered even better child support payments from obligors who were already decent payers.



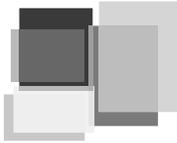
Like other child support remedies, these interventions work with a segment of the child support caseload and fall short of being a panacea for all. Like other child support remedies, they also require resources. The federal government should recognize this and treat interventions to address visitation problems as it does other child support expenditures. Minimally, this requires allowing referral and service activities dealing with visitation to qualify for federal reimbursement. Once identification of visitation problems and referral for services become normal agency practice, many ambiguities and hesitations will be resolved. Then it will be possible to train child support workers to identify noncustodial parents with visitation problems and to make appropriate referrals without fear of violating program rules or impeding case processing.





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