



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Submitted to:
Office of the Texas Attorney General
Child Support Division
P.O. Box 12017 - MC -51
Austin, TX 78711-2017

Submitted by:
Center for Policy Research
1570 Emerson St.
Denver, CO 80218
303-837-1555
www.centerforpolicyresearch.org

May 2010

Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.
Rasa Kaunelis, M.P.A.
Lanae Davis, M.A.

Prepared under OAG contract 08-C0064 based on an underlying grant (90F10091) from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE). 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.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Acknowledgements

The following individuals at the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), the Domestic Relations Office (DRO) and the IV-D Courts helped to conduct the Court Order Parent Education (COPE) Project.

Texas Office of the Attorney General

Michael Hayes

Anita Stuckey

OAG Office #607

Joel Flavin

Jennifer Zucker

OAG Office #613

Irma Alvarado

Susan Reyna

Anthony (Ty) Servello

Sherry Smiley Love

Barbara Vander Voord

Harris County Domestic Relations Office

Steve Hershkowitz

Janiece Horn

Blanca Reyna

David W. Simpson

Linda Sperling

Esther Sigala

Trevor Townes

Harris County IV-D Court

Associate Judge Veronica Torrez

OAG Office #703

Linda Arrigucci

Kristene Blackstone

Deborah Bray

Misty Miller

Sylvia Rodriguez

Travis County Domestic Relations Office

Cecelia Burke

Scot Doyal

Travis County IV-D Court

Associate Judge Dulce Madrigal

Associate Judge Angelita Mendoza-

Waterhouse



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Executive Summary

Funded by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), the Court Order Parent Education (COPE) Project provided parents establishing child support orders with a brief informational orientation to their court orders. The project was conducted by the Child Support Division of the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) in collaboration with the Domestic Relations Office (DRO) and IV-D courts in Harris County and Travis County, Texas. DROs provide investigation, mediation, coordination, and enforcement services to local courts and constituents and were retained to conduct the orientation sessions for COPE.

The goal of the project was to improve customer satisfaction and increase voluntary compliance with court orders. The mechanism used to inform litigants about their orders was a brief, live presentation conducted at the court immediately prior to negotiation sessions and court hearings to establish paternity and/or child support orders. It covered the nature of the child support order, visitation rights and standard possession orders, and medical support. Presenters also distributed information about relevant community resources. The evaluation conducted by Center for Policy Research (CPR) to determine whether the COPE program accomplished the desired outcomes involved:

- A review of literature about court-based parent education programs in other settings;
- Administration of a brief exit questionnaire to 1,529 parents following the orientation program; and
- Online surveys, focus groups, and interviews with child support professionals, judges, and DRO presenters to gauge the reactions of professionals to the program.

The analysis of parent questionnaires revealed that COPE was extremely effective in increasing parent understandings of many topics dealing with child support and visitation. An extremely high proportion of custodial and noncustodial parents, English and Spanish speakers, and parents with and without visitation problems reported improved understandings of various child support topics as a result of attending the COPE orientation. Those who arguably needed the program most, Spanish speakers, noncustodial parents, and parents with visitation problems, were significantly more likely to want more information about these topics and to perhaps find the COPE orientation too brief or not detailed enough. For example, while a third of English speakers wanted more information on various topics after COPE, this was the case for two-thirds to three-quarters of Spanish speakers, half of those who reported having problems with visitation, and 40 percent of noncustodial parents. This suggests that future programs should offer follow-up sessions with more detailed information for interested groups of parents and/or parents with certain characteristics such as Spanish speakers or those with visitation problems.

COPE also received extremely high rankings from child support workers, attorneys, and the judge in both Harris and Travis counties. Workers in one child support office ranked the project as 9 on a scale of 1 to 10, with one respondent giving it a score of 10. Even staff members in the office that complained that COPE had “slowed things down—painfully” gave the program a ranking of 8 or 9. The concept of educating litigants at court was strongly embraced by judges, child support attorneys, and establishment workers. Child support staff felt that COPE helped parents understand standard possession orders and their visitation rights and that as a result, they asked fewer questions about these issues during negotiations and court hearings. DRO presenters felt that COPE helped to “humanize” the court process



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

and helped parents understand what they faced that day. The types of parents singled out as most needing the orientation were Spanish-speaking parents and parents who were new to the child support system and had no prior cases.

All the problems with COPE reported by professionals in both counties were logistical and physical. In Harris County, the concerns about COPE stemmed from the mechanics of squeezing an orientation session into an overburdened docket without creating additional backlogs and delays. The biggest challenge to running the program in Travis County was the physical structure of the court and the lack of space for individual and small group meetings.

These problems existed despite a planning process that included executive OAG leadership, field office executive staff, regional managing attorneys, managing attorneys in affected offices (except in Houston, which was a later addition), executive DRO staff and presenters, judges, the sheriff's departments, and security personnel. Lower level staff in both counties perceived this to be a "top-down" planning approach and did not feel that they had sufficient input. These staff members also felt there was no method to communicate implementation issues once the project began. Consulting more with lower level staff and putting in place an oversight mechanism that allows for problem solving on a continual basis could help to solve some of the issues reported by project staff and increase buy in at all levels of the project. With on going consultation and buy in by critical personnel, courts might figure out alternative ways to speed up security screening processes, organize their dockets, and identify subgroups of litigants with special circumstances that warrant further educational interventions. Based on this research, it might include Spanish speakers, parents with visitation problems, noncustodial parents, and parents who are new to the child support system.

Other problems that stem from high case volume and lack of physical space may be more immutable. For example, the "siege mentality" in large urban court settings like Harris County tends not to inspire creative thinking about case management in order to permit more education and service interventions like COPE. Nor does the architecture of the court in Travis County and most other settings lend themselves to the introduction of needed ancillary services for families like orientation sessions, mediation services, and workforce programs.

Despite these barriers, COPE incorporated many features recommended by architects of other court orientation efforts, including the use of a mandatory, on-site court format, the development and distribution of relevant handouts and paper resources, and the involvement of the judiciary and court staff in gaining program support. The evaluation found that COPE fills an informational need and enjoys strong support from child support and court professionals. It should be revived for the general litigant population, and expanded for sub-groups shown to require more in-depth explanation. For program sustainability, COPE architects should consider adopting another key recommendation of experienced program providers, namely the use of core child support funding to support the program and keep it accessible to low-income, never-married parents in the child support system.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	2
Project Format.....	4
Characteristics of Participants	5
Participant Reactions	11
Staff Reactions	15
Structure of Future COPE Orientations	19
Conclusions.....	22
References.....	26

List of Tables

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of COPE Participants, by Site	6
Table 2. Relationships With the Other Parent Reported by COPE Participants, by Site	7
Table 3. Selected Characteristics of COPE Participants, by Language.....	8
Table 4. Selected Characteristics of COPE Participants, by Parental Status	9
Table 5. Relationships With the Other Parent Reported by COPE Participants, by Parental Status	9
Table 6. Participant Reported Levels of Contact Between the Noncustodial Parent and the Children, by Visitation Problems.....	10
Table 7. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Site....	11
Table 8. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Site	12
Table 9. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Language	12
Table 10. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Language.....	13
Table 11. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Amount of Visitation Problems Reported by Respondents	13
Table 12. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Amount of Visitation Problems Reported by Respondents	14
Table 13. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Parental Status	14
Table 14. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Parental Status	15



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Introduction

Funded by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), the Court Order Parent Education (COPE) Project provided an informational orientation to parents going through the process of establishing child support orders. The project was conducted by the Child Support Division of the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) in collaboration with the Domestic Relations Office (DRO) and IV-D courts in Harris County and Travis County, Texas. DROs provide investigation, mediation, coordination, and enforcement services to local courts and constituents and were retained to conduct the orientation sessions for COPE.

The goal of the project was to increase parents' understanding of the court/legal process, improve customer satisfaction and increase voluntary compliance with court orders. The project was premised on the belief that litigants who understand their orders and the court process used to establish them will do a better job of complying with them. The mechanism for educating litigants about their orders was a brief, live presentation conducted at the court immediately prior to negotiation sessions and court hearings to establish paternity and/or child support orders. It covered the nature of the child support order, visitation rights and standard possession orders, and medical support. Presenters also distributed information about relevant community resources. The orientation session was designed to:

- Address common confusions and misunderstandings that parents experience as they go through the court process by explaining the content of court orders in “plain English” or, for Spanish-language speakers, in plain Spanish;
- Improve the flow of cases at court by answering questions about child support or parenting time and reducing the number of parents who require attention by court personnel; and
- Improve compliance with court orders by deepening the understandings that parents have about their orders and the consequences of noncompliance.

The Center for Policy Research (CPR) was retained to conduct an evaluation to determine whether the COPE program accomplished the desired outcomes. As part of the evaluation, CPR:

- Conducted a review of literature about court-based parent education programs in other settings;
- Designed a brief exit questionnaire that was administered to parents following the completion of the orientation program;
- Administered online surveys to child support professionals and staff at the Domestic Relations Offices in the participating counties to gauge the reactions of professionals to the program; and
- Conducted focus groups and interviews with judges, presenters, child support attorneys, and other relevant professionals about the program and its perceived strengths and weaknesses.

This final report synthesizes all these evaluation components.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Background

Because court can be confusing, some courts have instituted programs to help parties navigate through this unfamiliar territory. Court education programs range from single-session classes for litigants; more extended classes on divorce, mediation, and co-parenting; all the way to sophisticated centers that offer education and assistance to *pro se* litigants. Until recently, most education efforts focused on the divorcing population. Indeed, a 2007 survey (Pollett and Lombreglia, 2008) found that 45 states offered parent education programs for divorcing parents, with 27 percent mandating attendance on a statewide basis. Some states, including Oregon, North Carolina, and California, require that parents participate in orientation before going through the mediation process.

Participants in divorce education and mediation orientation programs rate them highly, and credit the programs for explaining the rules and process of mediation. Brief programs appear to produce benefits equivalent to more intensive programs (“How Effective are Court-Affiliated Divorcing Parents Education Programs? A Meta-Analytic Study,” 2009). Researchers typically conclude that orientations are a cost-effective way to deliver information and normalize the divorce and mediation process (Malthis, *et al.*, 1999).

As beneficial as these programs have been for divorcing parents, they have been even more so for never-married parents. A federal study of court-based education programs found that never-married parents who attended these programs showed, as compared to divorced parents, greater increases in child support payments, greater gains in parent-child contact, greater improvements in relationships with the other parent, and greater perceived gains in the behavior of their youngest child (Administration for Children and Families, 2006).

However, never-married parents have a harder time accessing these beneficial programs. Because they do not have a divorce filing, which usually triggers referral to education programs, they are rarely reached in a timely manner. They may not end up in court “until their disagreements have reached a heightened level and parenting relationships have fallen apart to the point where they have no other choice but to go to court” (Moses, 2009). Some states and counties have, therefore, decided to reach out and try to offer helpful services and educational programs to never-married parents facing court proceedings about paternity and child support.

Alaska. Alaska initiated a program to reach out to parents and improve their understanding of litigation. The Alaska Family Law Self-Help Center was conceived after court administrators realized that self-represented litigants, who become more prevalent during tough economic times, made the court process much more difficult and took up huge amounts of time for court staff and judges. To alleviate some of the burdens on the court, the program was created to assist parents and make the court process run more efficiently. Located in Anchorage, the Center is built into the statewide court system and budget, and is funded entirely by state funds, including IV-D dollars. The Center deals exclusively with divorce and custody cases (including custody cases for never-married parents), and serves a statewide population by phone (via a “1-800” hotline) and Internet. Some courts mandate parents’ participation in a workshop that



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

educates parents about family law dispute procedures. The Center also offers a voluntary hearing and trial preparation class.

California. The California Family Law Facilitator Program offers free legal assistance to self-represented litigants in family court (Harrison, *et al.*, 2000). Mandated by statewide legislation, the program is funded by Title IV-D child support funds and is offered in every California county by the Office of the Family Law Facilitator (OFLF). OFLFs educate parents about child support matters, custody and visitation, domestic violence, paternity establishment, and divorce. Title IV-D funds do not cover visitation issues under this program; rather, individual courts earmark filing fees to fund OFLFs to help parents with visitation issues. The Family Law Facilitator Program: emphasizes education and information but cannot offer legal advice; is available to help both litigants in a case; acts as an impartial party in the case; and helps ensure that courts provide due process and equal access to all litigants (Harrison, *et al.*, 2000). OFLFs accomplish these goals by conducting daily group orientations on court procedures prior to hearings; offering one-on-one assistance in the court; and, in some counties, by outreaching to jails, homeless courts, and working out of the local child support agencies.

Toronto, Ontario. Toronto has started several programs to assist parents in understanding court procedures. Ontario Parent Information Sessions are funded by a mixture of federal and provincial funds. These sessions focus on custody and visitation, the court and ADR process, and the effects of divorce on children. Any parents involved in a separation, or contemplating separation, may attend these sessions. Judges often recommend that parties with custody and access disputes attend a class. Private foundation dollars fund a program called the Parent Information Program. The program similarly teaches parents to complete paperwork and understand court proceedings, alternatives to litigation, and the impact of separation on both children and adults. Finally, Toronto's federal court (Toronto Superior Court) mandates classes for anyone in a contested family matter. With this class, the Superior Court aims to prepare litigants for the court process.

Other Courts in the United States. Some county courts have made similar outreach and education efforts to never-married parents in the child support caseload. For example, the Essex Family Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey offers a course for never-married parents trying to establish child support, custody, or parenting-time agreements (Essex Vicinage, 2001). Designed to combat the growing number of these cases in court and attempt to resolve issues in a less adversarial manner, Essex County's "Best For Us For Our Children" program educates parents about the court process, offers alternate options to court, and teaches the importance of having both parents in a child's life (Administration for Children and Families, 2006).

The Maricopa County Superior Court in Arizona offers three different workshops for parents involved in child support cases. The workshops focus on paternity, custody, visitation, and support cases; child support modifications; and stopping or changing orders of assignment.

In Bexar County, Texas, the Domestic Relations Office provides court-based visitation orientations for parents through the ACCESS Visitation Enforcement Program. The orientation provides information on court terminology, standard possession orders, and answers to frequently asked questions. Although the



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

orientations are in English, the court offers Spanish-speaking services through the ACCESS program and staff also translate orders into Spanish and explain the orders to clients in simple terms.

Finally, judges in El Paso County, Texas order parents in establishment cases to attend a court orientation session. The orientation covers the standard possession order, conservatorship, co-parenting, court orders, and the ramification of violating court orders.

The literature on court orientation programs and interviews with program architects and administrators reveal strong support for the following program elements:

- Making the program mandatory;
- Conducting the programs on-site at the court;
- Providing program attendees with relevant handouts and paper resources; and
- Using core child support funding to sustain the programs and keep them accessible to low-income, never-married parents in the child support system.

Program administrators also emphasize the importance to program success of gaining the support of judges and court staff.

Project Format

The COPE project was conducted in Harris County (Houston) and Travis County (Austin), Texas. The projects launched and began offering court-based orientations to litigants on May 12, 2008, and June 5, 2008, respectively. Program services at both sites ended on September 30, 2009.

Both counties targeted parents in child support cases who were scheduled to appear in court to establish an order regarding paternity and/or child support. For one reason or another, these parents did not generate orders at the child support agency through an administrative procedure known as the Child Support Review Process (CSRP). During March 2009 to February 2010, 57 and 62 percent of new orders were established using CSRPs in Harris and Travis Counties, respectively. The cases targeted for COPE included all contested cases that were not resolved during the CSRP, cases that did not appear for a CSRP, and cases that did not qualify for a CSRP and were directly scheduled for court. This would include cases that involve a minor-aged parent and domestic violence matters. It is believed that parents who appear for CSRPs are more cooperative and responsible than those who use the court system to develop the terms of their child support orders.

During May to November 2008, the Harris County COPE project targeted Spanish-speaking clients from one child support office (#613) who had hearings scheduled in one Harris County courtroom. On December 1, 2008, the project expanded to serve English-speaking clients and an additional child support office (#607) began to contribute cases. In Travis County, the orientation session was held every Wednesday and Thursday at two courts. The courts serve populations that reside in two different geographical regions on their respective days. COPE services were delivered to Spanish- and English-speaking clients on both days.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

The project plan in both counties called for parties to be noticed to appear at the court at 8 A.M. to attend a scheduled child support hearing. In Travis County, the court changed the appearance time for litigants from 8:30 to 8:00 A.M. to accommodate the COPE presentation. Harris County litigants are routinely told to appear at 8:00 A.M. Next, DRO staff were supposed to show a 17-minute video that emphasizes the importance of parental cooperation and the destructive effects of conflict on children. After the “For Our Children: Learning to Work Together” video ended, it was expected that DRO personnel would deliver a 30-minute presentation that briefly touched on the language and topics that parents would confront that day as they participated in negotiations and hearings to establish paternity and a child support order. This included their rights and duties as parents, the standard possession order, visitation, the court process, and court orders. A PowerPoint presentation was prepared with slides that summarize the material that is covered orally. Presenters also had the option of using a variety of visual aids, such as a poster board with various legal terms and the “My Sticker Calendar,” which illustrates how the standard possession order works. Following the live presentation, there was a question-and-answer session. Finally, presenters gave participants handouts, including a “For Our Children Co-Parenting Guide,” a practical guide to shared parenting time, the My Sticker Calendar,¹ which simply illustrates Texas’ complex standard possession order to help parents and their children track and plan time the child spends in each parent’s home, and a sample parenting plan. All materials were made available in both English and Spanish.

Following each COPE session, participants were asked to complete a one-page exit questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gauge parental satisfaction and understanding of the topics covered in the orientation session. The questionnaire also collected limited personal information from participants, including their relationship with the other parent and child(ren), and the amount of visitation between the noncustodial parent and child(ren).

Characteristics of Participants

During May 2008 through September 2009, a total of 5,025 parents attended COPE orientations—2,652 from Harris County and 2,443 from Travis County. In this chapter, we present information only on those parents who completed and returned the brief questionnaires that were distributed after their orientation sessions. In Harris County, 1,023 returned the questionnaires and in Travis County, 506 returned the questionnaires, for a total of 1,529. Logistical challenges made questionnaire collection difficult.

Demographics. COPE attendees were more apt to be custodial as opposed noncustodial parents, particularly in Travis County, where 69 percent of parents who completed an exit questionnaire were custodial parents. In Harris County, the proportion of program attendees who classified themselves as a custodial versus a noncustodial parent was 58 and 37 percent, respectively. The difference between the two counties is statistically significant. There is also a statistically significant difference between the counties in the primary language spoken by COPE attendees, with Harris County participants being more apt to be Spanish speakers (14%) than Travis County participants (10%). As previously noted, Spanish-

¹ The “My Sticker Calendar” is available online at: http://www.oag.state.tx.us/AG_Publications/pdfs/calendar_visitation_web.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

speaking parents in Harris County were targeted exclusively for the first six months of the project. At both sites, about half of the parents were employed full-time, 15 percent were employed part-time, and approximately one-third were not employed at the time of the orientation. The majority of parents in both counties (89%) reported having one or two children in the case that brought them to court on the day of the orientation. Table 1 gives more information about the demographics of COPE participants.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of COPE Participants, by Site

	Harris County	Travis County	Total
★ Parental Status at Orientation			
Custodial Parent	58%	69%	62%
Noncustodial Parent	37%	26%	33%
Child Lives with Both Parents	4%	5%	4%
Other	1%	0%	1%
Number	(931)	(480)	(1,411)
★ Language			
English	86%	90%	87%
Spanish	14%	10%	13%
Number	(1,023)	(506)	(1,529)
Employment Status at Orientation			
Employed Full-Time	48%	47%	48%
Employed Part-Time	16%	14%	15%
Temporary/Seasonal Employment	5%	4%	5%
Not Employed	31%	36%	32%
Number	(963)	(490)	(1,453)
Number of Children on Case			
0	1%	0%	1%
1	72%	67%	70%
2	18%	21%	19%
3 or more	9%	11%	10%
Number	(808)	(428)	(1,236)

★ The difference between the groups is significant at .05 or less.

Relationships. Table 2 presents information on relationships and parent-child contact patterns for parents who attended the COPE orientation. It shows that attendees in Travis County were statistically more likely than their counterparts in Harris County to have lived with the other parent (63% versus 54%). On the other hand, Harris County participants were statistically more likely to attend the orientation with the other parent (80% versus 53%), and to report having problems with visitation (44% versus 35%). When asked how often the noncustodial parent sees the children in the case, about a quarter of respondents from both counties said “very regularly;” 23 percent and 15 percent of Harris and Travis County participants, respectively, said “somewhat regularly;” about a quarter of respondents from both counties said “rarely;” and 28 percent of Harris and 33 percent of Travis County participants said “never.” These differences were also statistically significant, suggesting that Travis County participants reported



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

more attenuated parent-child contact patterns than Harris County participants, even though they were more apt to have cohabited.

	Harris County	Travis County	Total
* Percentage who ever lived with the other parent	54%	63%	57%
Number	(948)	(480)	(1,428)
* Did the other parent attend the COPE orientation?			
Yes	80%	53%	71%
No	18%	35%	23%
Don't Know	2%	11%	5%
Number	(981)	(446)	(1,427)
* Do you and the other parent have any problems with visitation?			
Yes, big problems	23%	19%	22%
Yes, small problems	21%	16%	19%
No problems	56%	64%	59%
Number	(925)	(458)	(1,383)
* How often do the children see the NCP?			
Very regularly	24%	26%	25%
Somewhat regularly	23%	15%	20%
Rarely	25%	26%	25%
Never	28%	33%	30%
Number	(925)	(462)	(1,387)
* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.			

Spanish versus English Language Speakers. To see whether English and Spanish-language speakers who attended COPE differed, CPR compared characteristics of attendees for the two linguistic groups (see Table 3). As previously stated, Spanish-language speakers comprised 14 and 10 percent of the COPE participants in Harris and Travis counties, respectively. The comparison revealed that the COPE orientation was better attended by custodial versus noncustodial parents among both Spanish and English speakers, with the proportion of custodial parents in both groups being approximately 60 percent. On the other hand, the two groups differed with respect to employment and family size. While English speakers were significantly more likely to be employed full-time or unemployed when they went to the COPE orientation, Spanish-speaking parents were more likely to be employed part-time or in a seasonal/temporary capacity. With respect to family size, English-speaking COPE attendees reported having fewer children on their child support case. While 8 percent of English-speaking parents reported having three or more children on the child support case for which they were attending court, this was reported by 27 percent of Spanish speakers. In a similar fashion, nearly three-quarters (82%) of English speakers as opposed to half (52%) of Spanish speakers reported having only one child on their case.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table 3. Selected Characteristics of COPE Participants, by Language

	English Speakers	Spanish Speakers
Parental Status at Orientation		
Custodial Parent	62%	60%
Noncustodial Parent	33%	38%
Both	4%	1%
Other	1%	1%
Number	(1,263)	(148)
* Employment Status at Orientation		
Employed Full-Time	49%	41%
Employed Part-Time	14%	24%
Temporary/Seasonal Employment	4%	9%
Not Employed	33%	27%
Number	(1,276)	(177)
* Number of Children on Case		
0	1%	2%
1	72%	52%
2	18%	27%
3 or more	8%	19%
Number	(1,106)	(130)

* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

English- and Spanish-speaking participants reported fairly similar relationships with the other parent in their child support case. For example, the majority of respondents in both language groups reported no problems with visitation. Further, just under half of both groups reported that the noncustodial parent saw the children either “very” or “somewhat” regularly and just over half in each group reported low levels of contact or complete absence by the noncustodial parent. There was a statistically significant difference by language spoken with respect to whether the parents had ever lived together, with Spanish speakers being more likely than English speakers to have lived with the other parent at some point in time (64% and 56%, respectively).

Custodial versus Noncustodial Parents. A comparison of custodial and noncustodial parents attending the orientation revealed that the majority of both groups had one or two children in the child support case that brought them to court on the day of the COPE orientation and just over half of each group reported having lived with the other parent at some point in the past. Custodial parents were significantly more likely to be employed part-time or unemployed at the time of the orientation, while noncustodial parents were more likely to be employed full-time or working in a seasonal or temporary capacity. (See Table 4.)



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table 4. Selected Characteristics of COPE Participants, by Parental Status

	Custodial Parents	Noncustodial Parents
★ Employment Status at Orientation		
Employed Full-Time	47%	50%
Employed Part-Time	16%	14%
Temporary/Seasonal Employment	3%	6%
Not Employed	34%	31%
Number	(856)	(461)

★ The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

As shown in Table 5, custodial and noncustodial parents reported similar rates of visitation problems, but different levels of contact between the noncustodial parent and the child. In response to the question, “Do you and the other parent have any problems with visitation?” an identical 56 and 58 percent reported having “no problems.” On the other hand, custodial parents were significantly more likely to report that the noncustodial parent “never” sees the children (35% versus 24%) and less likely to report that visitation occurs “very regularly” (20% versus 25%).

Table 5. Relationships With the Other Parent Reported by COPE Participants, by Parental Status

	Custodial Parents	Noncustodial Parents
Do you and the other parent have any problems with visitation?		
Yes, big problems	24%	22%
Yes, small problems	20%	20%
No problems	56%	58%
Number	(805)	(438)
★ How often do the children see the NCP?		
Very regularly	20%	25%
Somewhat regularly	18%	26%
Rarely	27%	26%
Never	35%	24%
Number	(832)	(431)

★ The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

Problems with Visitation. Parents who reported having problems with visitation were significantly more likely to report lower levels of contact between the children and the noncustodial parent. Conversely, those who reported that visitation was a problem frequently indicated that the noncustodial parent was seeing the children fairly regularly. (Table 6 gives more information on this statistically significant relationship.) One exception to this pattern was the group of COPE participants who stated that they both had “no problems” with visitation and that the children never saw the noncustodial parent. In these cases, the lack of problems may reflect the total lack of contact between the parents regarding visitation.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table 6. Participant Reported Levels of Contact Between the Noncustodial Parent and the Children, by Visitation Problems

	Problems (n=560)	No Problems (n=772)
How often do the children see the noncustodial parent?		
★ Very regularly	7%	40%
★★ Somewhat regularly	18%	22%
★ Rarely	37%	17%
★ Never	38%	21%

★ The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

★★ The difference between the groups is significant at .10 or less.

Further analysis on parent-child contact levels and visitation problems reveals several statistically significant differences between parents who reported having “big problems” with visitation versus those who reported having only “small problems:”

- Just 2 percent of parents reporting “big problems” with visitation said that the children see the noncustodial parent “very regularly,” while 12 percent of those saying they have “small problems” with visitation reported regular contact;
- Nine percent and 29 percent of those reporting big and small problems, respectively, said that the children see the noncustodial parent “somewhat regularly;”
- About a third of parents saying they had both big and small problems also said the noncustodial parent in the case “rarely” visits the children; and
- Over half (54%) of the parents reporting “big problems” with visitation said that the children never see the noncustodial parent, compared with 21 percent of those saying they have “small problems.”

These patterns mirror those observed for parents who reported the existence versus the absence of problems. In both cases, parents who reported having visitation problems and/or “big” problems also reported lower levels of contact between the noncustodial parent and the children. The exception to this rule occurred for parents who said that they had “small problems” or “no problems” and that the noncustodial parent “never” saw the children. As previously discussed, it may well be that, in these cases, the parents avoided arguments about visitation and characterized their situation as free of visitation problems because the parents did not interact with one another.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Participant Reactions

The exit questionnaire also asked parents whether the COPE orientation had helped them understand the topics covered during the session and if they would like more information on selected topics. CPR’s analysis considers the responses of participants by the county location of the program, the language spoken by the parent, the custodial versus noncustodial parent status of the attendee; and the scale of the respondent’s problem with visitation.

Reactions, by Program Site. Nearly all respondents in Harris (96%) and Travis (95%) counties reported that the orientation increased their overall understanding of the topics covered during the session. Respondents in Harris County were statistically more likely than their counterparts in Travis County to report that they had gained a better understanding of many topics. This included the issues of child support, parental rights and duties, possession and access, medical support, how child support is calculated, the standard possession order, and variations to the standard possession order. Table 7 gives more information about these results.

Table 7. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Site

	Harris County (n=993)	Travis County (n=496)	Total (n=1,489)
* Child support	96%	92%	95%
* Parental rights and duties	97%	93%	95%
* Possession and access	96%	91%	94%
* Medical support	96%	92%	95%
What will happen in court	95%	94%	94%
* How child support amounts are calculated	94%	89%	93%
What happens if child support is not paid	89%	91%	90%
* Standard possession order	96%	91%	94%
* Variations to the standard possession order	94%	90%	93%
Legal rights to visitation	97%	98%	97%
Medical insurance and medical support	97%	96%	97%
How to deal with the other parent *	N/A	91%	N/A

* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

* Question was not included on Harris County questionnaire.

As shown in Table 8, just about 39 percent of Harris and Travis attendees said that they wanted more information on child support, parental rights and duties, possession and access, or medical support. There were no statistically significant differences by site.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table 8. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Site

	Harris County (n=870)	Travis County (n=427)	Total (n=1,297)
Child support	37%	41%	39%
Parental rights and duties	39%	41%	40%
Possession and access	38%	40%	39%
Medical support	35%	36%	36%

Reactions by Language Spoken. Following COPE, Spanish-speaking attendees were slightly more likely or just as likely as English-speaking attendees to report a better understanding of child support, parental rights and duties, possession and access, medical support, and what happens if child support is not paid. None of these differences were statistically significant. The orientation and the question and answer sessions were conducted in Spanish for Spanish-speaking parents in both Harris and Travis counties.

Table 9. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Language

	English Speakers (n=1,308)	Spanish Speakers (n=184)
Child support	94%	96%
Parental rights and duties	95%	97%
Possession and access	94%	94%
Medical support	95%	95%
* What will happen in court	96%	88%
* How child support amounts are calculated	93%	88%
What happens if child support is not paid	90%	90%
* Standard possession order	95%	88%
* Variations to the standard possession order	94%	87%
* Legal rights to visitation	98%	94%
* Medical insurance and medical support	97%	94%
** How to deal with the other parent *	92%	84%
Number	(444)	(45)

* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

** The difference between the groups is significant at .10 or less.

* Question was not included on Harris County questionnaire.

Table 10 shows that Spanish speakers were dramatically more likely than English speakers to want more information on the topics covered in the orientation. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of Spanish speakers expressed a desire for more information about child support, parental rights and duties, possession and access, and medical support. In contrast, only one-third of English speakers wanted more information.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table 10. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Language

	English Speakers (n=1,158)	Spanish Speakers (n=139)
* Child Support	35%	71%
* Parental Rights and Duties	36%	73%
* Possession and Access	35%	71%
* Medical Support	32%	67%

* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

Reactions by Visitation Problems. Regardless of the scale of their visitation problems, nearly all COPE attendees reported having a better understanding of the various topics covered in the orientation session. Parents who said they had big visitation problems were significantly less likely than less problem-ridden attendees to report better understandings of parental rights and duties, possession and access, standard possession orders, and legal rights to visitation. Those who said they had no visitation problems were the most apt to report increased understandings of the child support system.

Table 11. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Amount of Visitation Problems Reported by Respondents

	Big Problems (n=296)	Small Problems (n=263)	No Problems (n=798)
Child support	94%	94%	95%
* Parental rights and duties	92%	95%	97%
* Possession and access	89%	95%	96%
Medical support	95%	94%	96%
* What will happen in court	92%	95%	96%
How child support amounts are calculated	92%	93%	93%
* What happens if child support is not paid	87%	87%	92%
* Standard possession order	92%	95%	96%
* Variations to the standard possession order	90%	92%	95%
* Legal rights to visitation	95%	98%	99%
Medical insurance and medical support	98%	97%	97%
* How to deal with the other parent *	82%	92%	96%
Number	(87)	(74)	(286)

* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

* Question was not included on Harris County questionnaire.

Not surprisingly, parents who reported having big problems with visitation were significantly more likely to end the COPE session wanting more information. Approximately half of all attendees with big problems said that they were interested in more information about child support, parental rights and duties, possession and access, and medical support. To contrast, only about a third of attendees who lacked visitation problems reported a desire for more information.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Table 12. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Amount of Visitation Problems Reported by Respondents

	Big Problems (n=258)	Small Problems (n=232)	No Problems (n=713)
* Child support	50%	44%	32%
* Parental rights and duties	56%	45%	30%
* Possession and access	57%	44%	30%
* Medical support	46%	40%	29%
* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.			

Reactions by Custodial Status. One goal of COPE was to increase compliance with child support orders by noncustodial parents by improving their understanding of the child support system and the consequences of nonpayment. As previously noted, custodial parents were significantly more likely than noncustodial parents to attend the COPE orientation. Thus, at least some of the program objectives were thwarted by lower rates of attendance for noncustodial parents. The ensuing analysis considers whether the program had a different impact on custodial and noncustodial parents who attended. It shows that overall, the program made things clearer for 96 percent of custodial parents and 94 percent of noncustodial parents. Although the differences in understandings for individual topics were statistically significant, suggesting greater impacts for custodial parents, the data indicate that nearly all noncustodial parents who were exposed to the program reported increased understanding of virtually all topics that were addressed.

Table 13. Participants Reporting a Better Understanding of Selected Topics after COPE, by Parental Status

	Custodial Parents (n=858)	Noncustodial Parents (n=465)
* Child support	96%	92%
* Parental rights and duties	97%	93%
* Possession and access	96%	91%
* Medical support	96%	92%
* What will happen in court	96%	93%
* How child support amounts are calculated	95%	88%
What happens if child support is not paid	88%	91%
Standard possession order	95%	93%
Variations to the standard possession order	93%	91%
* Legal rights to visitation	98%	95%
* Medical insurance and medical support	98%	95%
* How to deal with the other parent *	94%	85%
Number	(323)	(123)
* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.		
* Question was not included on Harris County questionnaire.		



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Noncustodial parents were significantly more likely than custodial parents to want more information on certain topics covered during the orientation, particularly on child support and medical support. Overall, about 40 percent of noncustodial parents wanted more information on the major issues that COPE addressed.

Table 14. Participants Who Want More Information On Selected Topics, by Parental Status

	Custodial Parents (n=753)	Noncustodial Parents (n=404)
* Child support	35%	42%
Parental rights and duties	37%	41%
Possession and access	36%	41%
* Medical support	31%	39%

* The difference between the groups is significant at 0.05 or less.

Staff Reactions

Online surveys were administered to child support workers and DRO personnel in Harris and Travis counties. A total of 27 OAG and 22 DRO workers responded to the questionnaire. In addition, focus groups and telephone interviews were conducted with approximately 20 judges, child support attorneys and office managers, establishment workers, and Domestic Relations Office personnel in both counties. The questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups aimed to obtain information on how COPE actually operated in each county setting, staff reactions to COPE, its perceived impact on parents, and recommendations for program change and improvement.

Format. COPE personnel in Harris County followed the plan developed by program architects: a representative of the Harris County Domestic Relations Office delivered a brief, oral introduction about the establishment process and the 17-minute video on parental cooperation was shown. This was supposed to occur between 8:00 and 8:20 A.M. After that, the clerk called the roll. At 9:00 A.M., parents were supposed to be dispatched to an adjacent courtroom for a presentation. Depending upon the presenter, this lasted from 20 to 30 minutes. Separate presentations were offered for Spanish- and English-speaking audiences. English-speaking presenters used a series of PowerPoint slides that served as a “visual” background and provided some written reinforcement of the legal terms they described. Spanish-speaking presenters had smaller groups and adopted a more informal format that did not involve the use of PowerPoint slides. By 9:30 A.M., parents were supposed to be back in the original courtroom, ready to meet with OAG attorneys.

In actual fact, DRO personnel frequently discovered that the courtroom was locked at 8:00 A.M. and they could not begin the video at the scheduled time. The delay rippled through the roll-call process, which usually occurs two times between 8:00 and 9:00 A.M. With the conduct of the COPE orientation, negotiations and court hearings did not begin until 9:30. Some maintained that they began even later.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Implementing COPE in Travis County required changing the time that litigants were told to appear at court to establish paternity and child support orders from 8:30 to 8:00 A.M. By getting litigants to assemble at court a half-hour earlier, it was possible for the presiding judge to continue to call her docket at the usual time of 8:45. Given the limited amount of time available to conduct the orientation session, DRO presenters did not incorporate the video on parental cooperation in their presentation. Instead, it was played on a loop in the waiting room. Litigants moved right into the COPE orientation session, which was held in the courtroom without use of PowerPoint slides. Although the plan called for DRO presenters to conduct the orientation from 8:00 to 8:30, they were often delayed by a lengthy security screening process and by time-consuming instructions on the dress code that was delivered by a court liaison. After a few months, the sheriff's deputies agreed to begin the security screening process before 8:00 A.M. and the oral instructions on the dress code were shortened and/or eliminated. These measures increased the amount of time available for the COPE orientation although presenters said that they rarely had a full 30 minutes.

Impact on the Court Process. Most surveyed (65%) and interviewed Harris County child support workers and attorneys felt that COPE slowed things down at court. Some staff members maintained that when COPE orientations were conducted on Mondays, negotiations did not begin until 10:00 A.M. The judge said that COPE led her to call her docket at 9:30 rather than 9:00 A.M. She did not feel it was practical to ask litigants to arrive at court before 8:00 A.M. Nor did she see a way of shortening up the process of calling roll, which occurs two times between 8:00 and 9:00 A.M.

To contrast, only 18 percent of DRO personnel in Harris County thought that COPE had slowed down the court process; they thought that any delay was due to the court's tardiness in opening up the courtroom and processing cases in a timely manner. As one staff member put it, "There was a huge perception that we were holding up the show, but they would hold up the show. We would show up at court at 8:00 A.M. and find the door locked and couldn't get in."

Delay was not an issue in Travis County. The Travis judge said that COPE was "out of sight." She continued to call the docket at 8:45 A.M. No one said it had been a problem to change the time for litigants to appear at court from 8:30 to 8:00, DRO presenters were perceived to be good team players who worked well with child support and court staff to ensure that the court's business was not interrupted, and OAG managers maintained that the project did not disturb their staff. In the words of one, "COPE did not change our life."

Content. DRO personnel in Harris tried to give parents an "overview" of the entire process so that the terms were not "brand new" when they met with OAG personnel and the judge. Nearly all (94%) DRO staff felt as though the content of the COPE orientation was right. About the only item they viewed as less compelling to cover was how to modify a child support order, with 31 percent of surveyed workers characterizing it as "not important." More than a third (38%) of surveyed DRO staff agreed that COPE tried to cover too much material for the time available. They were more likely than OAG staff (44% versus 25%) to support informal formats that avoid the use of a PowerPoint.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

The COPE topics that received the highest endorsements by child support personnel were those dealing with co-parenting, the standard possession order, and conservatorship. In focus groups, OAG staff emphasized that it was particularly important for parents to get information about visitation. In their view, parents need to know that they have visitation rights, what standardized visitation orders are all about, and that it is possible to get a non-standardized order. Since OAG staff already address medical and child support issues with parents during their negotiations, they favored the COPE presentation focusing on visitation, conservatorship, and father's rights since these are topics that they "don't touch much."

COPE presenters in Travis County reported that they stressed the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the other parent, the meaning of standard possession, and how to deviate from standard possession and develop more customized visitation arrangements. Some presenters talked about child support guidelines and wage withholding procedures. The judge thought that all these issues were useful and would also welcome a discussion of retroactive support and the matters that are within the judge's discretion and those that are determined by formula.

Benefits for Different Types of Parents. DRO personnel in both counties (88%) agreed that COPE helped Spanish-speaking parents better understand what goes on in court. Unfamiliar with the American judicial system and posed with a language barrier, Spanish-speaking parents learned what to expect through the COPE presentation. As one presenter put it, "We witnessed them to be the ones most grateful for the COPE presentation." Child support personnel also agreed that Spanish-speaking parents benefited especially from COPE. Since they tend to fear the legal system, they were reassured when presenters explained that Social Security numbers collected by the child support agency do not get conveyed to agencies that handle immigration.

Child support staff also thought that COPE might give noncustodial parents encouragement about their visitation rights, although they might be discouraged to learn that the OAG could not help them enforce those rights. Most personnel believed that mothers were more receptive and responsive to COPE orientations than fathers, an observation that was supported by the higher rates of attendance for custodial parents. In their view, custodial parents often wanted to know how to get a non-visiting father more involved with his child, whether she should compel her children to go on visits, and/or what would happen if she wanted to move, while fathers asked questions about reversing paternity decisions or how to make visits go more smoothly. In general, staff felt that COPE addressed the confusions that many parents held about the standard visitation order and how that translates into actual visitation.

Another group of parents singled out as being suitable for COPE was very young parents who are particularly naïve about court orders, visitation rights, and other legal and financial matters associated with child support orders.

Finally, many respondents felt that first-time clients and those with new orders would benefit most from the COPE orientation. Since those who have prior child support cases are perceived to "know the drill," it was suggested that parents who are new to the child support system be targeted for the orientation while repeat filers would proceed to regular court interventions.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Benefits for Staff. Half of the child support officers who answered the online survey felt that parents who were exposed to COPE asked fewer visitation questions when they met with child support officers and attorneys. COPE was perceived to reduce the incidence of questions on whether parents must let children go on visits or whether parents might depart from the standard possession order. Some child support personnel felt that COPE helped to put parents on the “right track” to acknowledge paternity and their parental responsibilities and gave them information about their options. Finally, they liked the fact that noncustodial parents learned that they had visitation rights. The following comments are illustrative:

I thought the program was great even though the delay was annoying. They understood these things even before I mentioned it. There definitely were fewer questions. They weren't so mad at me.

A lot of parents seem more knowledgeable about their child support situation following the clinic...A lot of men assume child support will take all their money and then they find out about the guidelines...So the clinic really helps diffuse that anger and break their misconceptions.

Fortunately, none of the fears that COPE would jeopardize agreement making that OAG personnel expressed at the start of the project materialized. On the contrary, more than half of surveyed OAG personnel (58%) agreed that COPE helped parents reach agreements about their orders. To the extent they perceived the project to impact their work, it was positive with fewer than a third (31%) indicating that COPE had made it more difficult to get their job done.

Overall Utility and Drawbacks. Most interviewed child support attorneys and establishment workers in Harris County agreed that orientation sessions are “important and valuable for customers,” and that getting some questions addressed up front should make the negotiation process go faster, “at least in theory.” Indeed, as previously noted, virtually all interviewed child support staff felt that as a result of attending the orientation, parents asked fewer questions about visitation. Although the judge in Harris County did not get feedback from litigants or attorneys on the impact of COPE on the negotiation process, she too feels as though “education means everything” and that it is “good to get a heads up before coming into my court.”

While DRO and OAG professionals agreed that it was hard to quantify the benefits of the COPE orientation for parents, they believed that parents who sat through the full participation were “a little more relaxed about the negotiation process.” Because it “educates people about things that are going to happen that day,” it is viewed as “empowering.” Another presenter felt the COPE served to “humanize” the Family Court. She contrasted the COPE orientation to the usual scene at the court this way:

Coming to court is like being a foreigner in a strange land. You are being yelled at by the sheriffs and herded in through metal detectors. The program brings a caring human touch to the setting. With us, you get a human connection right away.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

While few believe that a brief intervention like COPE can revolutionize co-parenting and child support payment behaviors, most think that it can “help parents understand the morning a little better.” By making parents better informed, the intervention may improve “buy-in” with the order because “everyone comes out with an order they had a part in preparing.”

The chief drawbacks to COPE for child support personnel and the court in Harris County was the delay it was perceived to have caused in the court. Establishment workers, child support attorneys, and the judge agreed that the COPE orientation pushed back the start of negotiations and hearings until 9:30 A.M. Since they dislike having to “wait around an hour before we could negotiate,” but also lack the time to explain visitation matters to parents on an individual basis, most child support personnel considered COPE to be “inconvenient, but necessary.”

The limited amount of time allocated for the COPE presentation was the biggest problem for DRO personnel. Nearly all presenters reported feeling “rushed.” One said it was like “[g]iving a short course in family law in 30 minutes.” He aimed to familiarize parents with many terms and concepts; as a result, he was afraid that he covered material too quickly and wondered if “anything sank in.”

Travis County child support and court personnel also supported the idea of having an educational orientation before a court hearing to establish a paternity and child support order. As the judge explained, “I can’t imagine it was not helpful for parents to hear this stuff before they come to me.” DRO presenters thought that the COPE orientation addressed a lot of parental questions and clarified their situation. OAG personnel echoed these sentiments and appreciated the fact that the DRO presenters had prepared parents for many of the terms and issues they encountered when they met with child support attorneys and establishment workers. As one child support manager explained:

The presentation focused on conservatorship and visitation issues. It was great. It was an overview so they weren’t shocked by the words when we said it or the judge talked about this.

In the eyes of both the court and DRO presenters, the biggest problem with COPE in Travis County was the lack of physical space at the courthouse. The orientation was held in a large waiting area, right next to the security screening center. In addition to sometimes being a noisy setting for an orientation, it afforded no opportunity for privacy or to break into smaller groups that might be more conducive to interaction and invite more questions from participating parents. While orientation groups ranged in size from 10 to 50 participants, presenters agreed that the ideal size is about a dozen. Another problem that presenters faced was feeling rushed, especially before sheriff’s deputies allowed litigants to enter the court before 8 A.M. and the dress code instructions were shortened and/or eliminated.

Structure of Future COPE Orientations

The COPE project ended on September 30, 2009; orientation sessions in Harris and Travis counties ceased. In focus groups and one-on-one interviews, child support personnel and DRO presenters were asked to consider how the program might be resurrected and informed by this pilot project experience.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Location. The court is viewed as being the logical place for an orientation program in both counties. Although the courthouse in both settings is less than ideal, off-site locations are regarded as totally unworkable. As one respondent put it, “The beauty of a court-based orientation is that people have been served and tend to show up.” In a similar fashion, the idea of holding an orientation at the court after the promulgation of orders was also rejected as being impractical. After being in court all day, litigants often have work or child care matters to address and tend to leave quickly when their hearing ends and their order is finalized.

Audience. While COPE was viewed as beneficial for all parents, there was considerable support in both counties for identifying parents who are new to the child support system and directing them to attend the orientation session. Splitting the docket in this fashion might also reduce the perceived delays associated with COPE in Harris County, since a group of parents would be immediately available for traditional negotiation and hearing treatments. DRO personnel support this approach too and liken it to a jury assembly process whereby everyone is brought to the same room and then pulled out for different treatments. One concern is whether litigants would be able to accurately self-identify as new versus repeat players in the child support system. They would prefer to have new filers identified by the OAG prior to the day of their hearing so that this information would appear on the docket sheet. Most OAG staffers in Harris County feel that self-identification may be the only practical way to differentiate between new and repeat filers. A barrier to screening for new cases in Travis County is the lack of space at the courthouse to effectively “slice and dice” the audience. Since everyone gathers in the lobby, any type of sorting process would have to be done through self-identification, with newer or repeat cases proceeding to the courtroom while the other group remains in the lobby. The sorting system would be inevitably marred by the arrival of latecomers.

Child support and DRO personnel in both counties also agree that Spanish speakers are particularly suited for an orientation session. Since court orders are only written in English, Spanish speakers have a great need for simple, explanatory information in a language that they can understand. The questionnaire data showing that Spanish-speaking parents are significantly more likely to want additional information on the topics covered in the COPE orientation both corroborate staff observations and underscore the need for an even more intensive intervention with Spanish speakers.

Format. All child support and DRO staff members in both counties agree that an oral presentation is necessary and that a brochure or other printed material is not an effective substitute. The value of the presentation stems from the fact that it is delivered by a knowledgeable, third-party “neutral.” It is also more understandable since presenters can explain legal terms in simple language, be informal, and respond to questions in both a group and one-on-one format.

There was mixed reaction to the 17-minute video that was shown prior to the oral presentation in Harris County but dropped in Travis County. While most surveyed OAG (79%) and DRO (69%) personnel characterized the video as “useful,” a number of respondents thought that it took too much time and, in Harris County, added unnecessary delay to the start of the negotiation and hearing process. Although



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

DRO personnel doubt that parents would pay attention, a number of respondents suggested that the video be shown on a loop at court, as is the practice in Travis County.

Child support and DRO personnel agree that the orientation should be limited to about 30 minutes since the court calendar does not allow for a lengthier intervention and parents have trouble listening for a longer period of time. Child support personnel favor program strategies that combine “the most amount of knowledge in the least amount of time.” Since few parents will ask questions in a large group setting, DRO presenters and OAG personnel agree that is important for presenters to be available to parents for follow-up questions after the orientation session has ended.

Resources and Other Services. Staff in both counties say that sticker calendars help parents visualize how the child’s time will be divided and favor their routine distribution. They also appreciate it when DRO personnel “hang around to answer questions.” If it could be arranged, judges and child support personnel at both courts would like DRO personnel or another facilitator available at the court to help interested parents immediately after the COPE orientation to craft non-standard visitation arrangements. While they see no problem with incorporating non-standard visitation terms in child support orders, they say that space constraints limit their ability to hold mediation sessions at court. As the judge in Travis County explained, “My background is social work. Court is where you find this population, so I’m all for bringing in more people like mediation and workforce programs to help these folks.” Although the court hosts an on-site genetic testing service, it is offered in a less than optimal public setting and the physical limitations of the court are becoming increasingly apparent.

While extensive written materials are viewed as unnecessary, DRO presenters feel that parents would benefit by including in the mailed notice to appear, a simple instruction sheet with frequently asked questions about the day in court. Sample questions include: Am I going to be in court all day? Will I be able to use a phone? Will I be able to get food at court or should I bring food with me? Will I be able to go back to work?

Presenters. Although some OAG staff in Harris County feel that parents listen to an attorney “better,” they agree that presenters do not have to be attorneys and both sites have found non-attorney presenters to be extremely satisfactory. On the other hand, child support personnel feel that presenters need to be familiar with the content of child support orders, negotiation parameters around parenting time orders, and have experience “knowing what is enforceable.” The requisites for an effective presenter include being a neutral, having Spanish-language skills, and being able to explain legal terms in an understandable way. Some child support staff feels that it is helpful to have a male presenter. The DRO is perceived to be the appropriate agency to perform this job and receives high marks for its performance in both counties. As one judge put it, “DRO put out a good product, the staffing was excellent.” In contrast, there was no support for having OAG staff assume the orientation function. In addition to needing new staff to do this job, managers did not think OAG personnel would be perceived as a neutral or independent source of information. As the judge explained:



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

Your OAG staff are so busy, they couldn't do it. And there is always an appearance of bias with OAG personnel. The DRO feels like an arm of the court. They are neutral and not prosecutors.

Physical Space. Finding space in which to conduct COPE orientations is challenging in both counties. While Harris County had an adjacent courtroom that could be used, it was difficult to find additional space in which to conduct simultaneous English- and Spanish-language presentations. DRO personnel believe that the physical detractors of the Harris County court undermine morale among OAG personnel and make them less receptive to new programs such as COPE. The court in Travis is also viewed as lacking in the space needed for simultaneous orientations with smaller groups of parents and/or mediation or other outside services.

Planning Process. The COPE project suffered from the bruises caused by a perceived "top-down" planning approach in both counties. Indeed, staff for one of the Harris County child support offices brought into the project did not recall having any input. As one attorney put it, "One day we were in court and they said, 'Hi, I'm from COPE and we're going to do this and you have to adjust.'" The communication process, once the project began, was also limited, and there were no joint training or review sessions to identify implementation problems and iron them out. Since some of the delay associated with the COPE orientation was due to the court's system for calling and managing cases in Harris County and security screenings and explanations by court liaisons in Travis County, it was suggested that the bailiff, court clerk, sheriff's deputies, and court liaisons be included in the planning process along with OAG and DRO personnel and the judge. It is hoped that a more inclusive planning process will better sensitize personnel to the pressures that each professional group faces and inspire more teamwork. Since they control the flow of resources, OAG personnel also recommended that officials who are "higher up the food chain" be included in the planning process too. The goal would be to get district court judges and county commissioners invested in the concept of court orientation programs and committed to their effective implementation.

Conclusions

The evaluation of COPE involved an assessment of quick exit questionnaires completed by 1,529 parents who attended a brief, court-based orientation session in Harris and Travis counties immediately prior to the conduct of negotiations and hearings to establish an order dealing with paternity and/or child support; online surveys with 27 OAG and 22 DRO professionals; and telephone interviews and focus groups with approximately 20 child support professionals, COPE presenters, and judges in both counties.

The analysis of parent questionnaires revealed that COPE was extremely effective in increasing parent understandings of many topics dealing with child support and visitation. An extremely high proportion of custodial and noncustodial parents, English and Spanish speakers, and parents with and without visitation problems reported improved understandings of various child support topics as a result of attending the COPE orientation. The program was somewhat less effective for those who perhaps needed it the most: Spanish speakers, noncustodial parents, and parents with big visitation problems, but still very effective overall. Although a high proportion of these parents reported improved understandings



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

following the COPE orientation, the proportions were significantly lower than those reported by custodial parents and parents without problems. More to the point, Spanish speakers, noncustodial parents, and parents with visitation problems were significantly more likely to want more information about these topics and to perhaps find the COPE orientation too brief or not detailed enough. For example, while a third of English speakers wanted more information on various topics after COPE, this was the case for two-thirds to three-quarters of Spanish speakers, half of those who reported having problems with visitation, and 40 percent of noncustodial parents. This suggests that future programs should offer follow-up sessions with more detailed information for interested groups of parents and/or parents with certain characteristics such as Spanish speakers or those with visitation problems.

COPE also received extremely high rankings from child support workers, attorneys, and the judge in both Harris and Travis counties. Workers in one child support office ranked the project as 9 on a scale of 1 to 10, with one respondent giving it a score of 10. Even staff members in the office that complained that COPE had “slowed things down—painfully” gave the program a ranking of 8 or 9. The concept of educating litigants at court was strongly embraced by judges, child support attorneys, and establishment workers. Child support staff felt that COPE helped parents understand standard possession orders and their visitation rights and that as a result, they asked fewer questions about these issues during negotiations and court hearings. The types of parents they singled out as most needing the orientation were Spanish-speaking parents and parents who were new to the child support system and had no prior cases.

All the problems with COPE in both counties were logistical and physical. In Harris County, the concerns about COPE stemmed from the mechanics of squeezing an orientation session into an overburdened docket without creating additional backlogs and delays. The biggest challenge to running the program in Travis County was the physical structure of the court and the lack of space for individual and small group meetings.

These problems existed despite a planning process that included executive OAG leadership, field office executive staff, regional managing attorneys, managing attorneys in affected offices (except in Houston, which was a later addition), executive DRO staff and presenters, judges, the sheriff's departments, and security personnel. Lower level staff in both counties perceived this to be a “top-down” planning approach and did not feel that they had sufficient input. These staff members also felt there was no method to communicate implementation issues once the project began. Consulting more with lower level staff and putting in place an oversight mechanism that allows for problem solving on a continual basis could help to solve some of the issues reported by project staff and increase buy in at all levels of the project. With on going consultation and buy in by critical personnel, courts might figure out alternative ways to speed up security screening processes, organize their dockets, and identify subgroups of litigants with special circumstances that warrant further educational interventions. Based on this research, it might include Spanish speakers, parents with visitation problems, noncustodial parents, and parents who are new to the child support system.

Other problems that stem from high case volume and lack of physical space may be more immutable. For example, the “siege mentality” in large urban court settings like Harris County tends not to inspire



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

creative thinking about case management in order to permit more education and service interventions like COPE. Nor does the architecture of the court in Travis County and most other settings lend themselves to the introduction of ancillary services for families like orientation programs, mediation services, and workforce programs.

Despite these barriers, COPE incorporated many features recommended by architects of other court orientation efforts, including the use of a mandatory, on-site court format, the development and distribution of relevant handouts and paper resources, and the involvement of the judiciary and court staff in gaining program support.

The evaluation found that COPE fills an informational need and enjoys strong support from child support and court professionals. It should be revived for the general litigant population and expanded for sub-groups that need more in-depth explanation. For program sustainability, COPE architects should consider adopting another key recommendation of experienced program providers, namely the use of core child support funding to support the program and keep it accessible to low-income, never-married parents in the child support system.



Court Order Parent Education: Final Report

References

- Administration for Children and Families (2006). *Child Access and Visitation Programs: Participant Outcomes: Program Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pol/DCL/2007/dcl-07-15a.pdf>.
- Essex Vicinage: Family Division (2001). *Parent Education Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.judiciary.state.nj.us/essex/family/education.htm>.
- Harrison, F.L., Chase, D.J., and Surh, L.T. (2000). "California's Family Law Facilitator Program: A New Paradigm for the Courts." *Journal of the Center for Families, Children, and the Courts*. 61-97.
- "How Effective are Court-Affiliated Divorcing Parents Education Programs? A Meta-Analytic Study." Manuscript submitted for publication. *Family Court Review* (2009).
- Malthis, R., Tanner, Z., and Whinnery, F. (1999). "Evaluations of Participant Reactions to Premediation Group Orientations." *Mediation Quarterly*, 17(2), 153-159.
- Moses, J. (2009). *Parenting with a Plan: How TANF Can Support Positive Parenting Relationships and Foster Father Involvement*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress.
- Pollet, S.L. and Lombreglia, M. (2008). "A Nationwide Survey of Mandatory Parent Education." *Family Court Review*. 46(2), 375-389.