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## Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Divorce Education: Connecting Program Theory and Curricular Content

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*Many parent and family education programs lack a clearly articulated program theory that is solidly founded in the social science literature and used to guide rigorous evaluation. This article describes the program theory for Parents Forever, a divorce education program developed by the Minnesota Extension to serve divorcing parents. The Parents Forever program theory is theoretically based and empirically-informed. The program theory is based on three significant frameworks, which serve as the theoretical foundation for the program: human ecosystems, life course development, and family resilience. These theories are explored and discussed. Three primary change mechanisms relevant for divorcing families serve as the empirical foundation of the program. Parent-child and coparent relationships are commonly addressed in divorce education programs; however, the inclusion of parental self-care as the third mechanism to promote family resilience is a unique contribution of Parents Forever. Relevant concepts derived from the empirical literature related to these three mediators are presented. Connections between the curricular content and program theory (i.e., theoretical framework and three change mechanisms) are made explicit, and program theory is used to demonstrate the unique contribution that Parents Forever makes to the field of divorce education.*

**Keywords:** divorce education, Parents Forever, divorce, parent-child relationships, coparenting, parental self-care, parenting interventions

## **Introduction**

The rapid rise of divorce and its potential negative impact on families, particularly children, was a prominent social concern throughout the twentieth century (Hango & Houseknecht, 2005;

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Kelly & Emery, 2003; Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). Although divorce rates have stabilized in the past decade, the United States still reports the highest rate of divorce in the world, and worry persists for the state of divorcing families (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). In response, a great deal of empirical evidence accumulated over recent decades regarding the impact of divorce on adults and children. What was once considered a major traumatic experience for children has now become almost normative, with considerable variation in how families manage the transition (Fine, Ganong, & Demo, 2010). A developmental framework is now applied to the experience of divorce, with scholars viewing it as a long-term process that begins far before and continues long after the legal paperwork is finalized (Amato, 2000).

### **Family Life Education and Divorce Education**

The goal of supporting parents and children as their family structure and roles change due to separation or divorce is a natural but unique context for family life education. Family life education's purpose is to "strengthen and enrich individual and family well-being (Thomas & Arcus, 1992, p. 4) by providing information, tools, and strategies to motivate and equip families to improve their lives (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011) and by teaching and fostering knowledge and skills that encourage healthy coping when exposed to family problems (Arcus & Thomas, 1993). Divorce education is the specific application of family life education during the divorce transition and has become a primary intervention with families to help avert and/or limit the negative impact of divorce on children. It recognizes the family as the primary context for child development and parents as a particularly important protective factor for their children. Divorce education interventions prepare divorcing adults for transitions and challenges they may face related to finances, parenting, coparenting, and personal stresses (Fine et al., 2010).

Pollet and Lombreglia (2008) reviewed divorce education policy nationwide and found that 46 states had some form of court-connected divorce education program, with 27 states mandating attendance at the legislative level, and 11 states having county and judicial level mandates. More recently, Mulroy, Riffe, Brandon, Lo, and Vaidyanath (2013) conducted a national survey of Extension parenting education programs and resources for separating and divorcing families and found that 19 states mandated programs for separating or divorcing parents of minor age children statewide, while in 27 states, the program mandate was local and only being enforced in certain counties, districts, or by certain judges. The movement around court-connected divorce education began in the early 1990s and rapidly gained momentum, with the number of programs tripling by the late 1990s (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011; Geasler & Blaisure, 1995). Programs are highly variable and can range in dosage from two hours to upwards of 10 hours, be mandatory or voluntary, and can be idiosyncratic to a particular county or available across the state and/or nation (Blaisure & Geasler, 2000; Fackrell et al., 2011; Mulroy et al., 2013; Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 2011).

Despite their widespread use and growing proliferation, the quality of the research and evaluation on the effectiveness of divorce education programs has not kept pace (Fackrell et al., 2011). Several researchers in recent years have pointed out the discouraging lack of random assignment and experimental designs in studies of divorce education (see Fackrell et al., 2011; Salem, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2013; Sigal et al., 2011). While random assignment to conditions is widely considered to be the gold standard in establishing evidence of effectiveness (Orr, 1999), there are systemic barriers to conducting random assignment within a system (i.e., the courts) whose mission is to provide “equal access to justice” (Sigal et al., 2011, p. 133). This is particularly true for states where parents are mandated to attend divorce education.

Additionally, many divorce education programs suffer from a lack of clarity and explication of their theory of change, both critical pieces that need to be in place to study a program’s outcomes (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998; Sigal et al., 2011). Many times, the content and duration of divorce education programs may be more reflective of a particular jurisdiction’s legislative mandate or available resources, rather than theory or evidence from the field on supporting families in transition. For example, some states mandate a minimum of two hours of content (e.g., Ark. Code Ann. § 9-12-322), some mandate a minimum of four hours of content (e.g., Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 10.009), while others mandate a minimum of eight hours of content (e.g., Minn. Stat. § 18.157). While programs of varying dosage have evidence of effectiveness (Fackrell et al., 2011), no studies have compared greater dosage programs to shorter-term programs in a rigorous RCT study; thus, decisions about dosage at the legislative level may be premature.

The movement towards stronger theoretical or empirical foundations for divorce education programs is often limited by time and cost constraints in addition to legislated content. Some states have required content that the program must cover to meet the mandate, while others are far broader and more general. Perhaps partly a function of how these programs originated, little is available in the literature discussing the theoretical and empirical foundations of specific divorce education programs. Without such a literature base, it is difficult for professionals to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between programs and to match program theories of change with intended outcomes in evaluation studies. Bowers, Mitchell, Hardesty, and Hughes (2011) reviewed six online divorce education programs and found a “weak theory-research link” (p. 784) and the same problems that Geasler and Blaisure (1998) identified in their review of in-person programs that “citations were not always provided, and programs did not explicitly identify theoretical frameworks used” (p. 783). Therefore, despite a call in the late 1990s for a greater discussion of theory in divorce education (Geasler & Blaisure, 1998) and the increasing emphasis on delivering evidence-based curricula and more rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness (Salem et al., 2013), the field continues to struggle with making these steps a standard part of the process of program development.

This paper is an effort to address that gap by illustrating the unique theoretical and empirical foundations of Parents Forever, a divorce education curriculum developed by Minnesota

Extension. The theoretical grounding of Parents Forever is one step of a larger journey towards more rigorous forms of program evaluation. Conducting an impact evaluation, with quasi-experimental and/or experimental design, is most appropriate for evaluating programs that are stable, established, and mature, and typically require that program processes have been examined and that program theory is clearly articulated (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The Parents Forever program processes have been evaluated through the completion of an implementation study. Therefore, the work highlighted in this paper is reflective of the Parents Forever team's movement towards creating the optimal conditions for a future study that employs experimental design by clearly articulating the program theory.

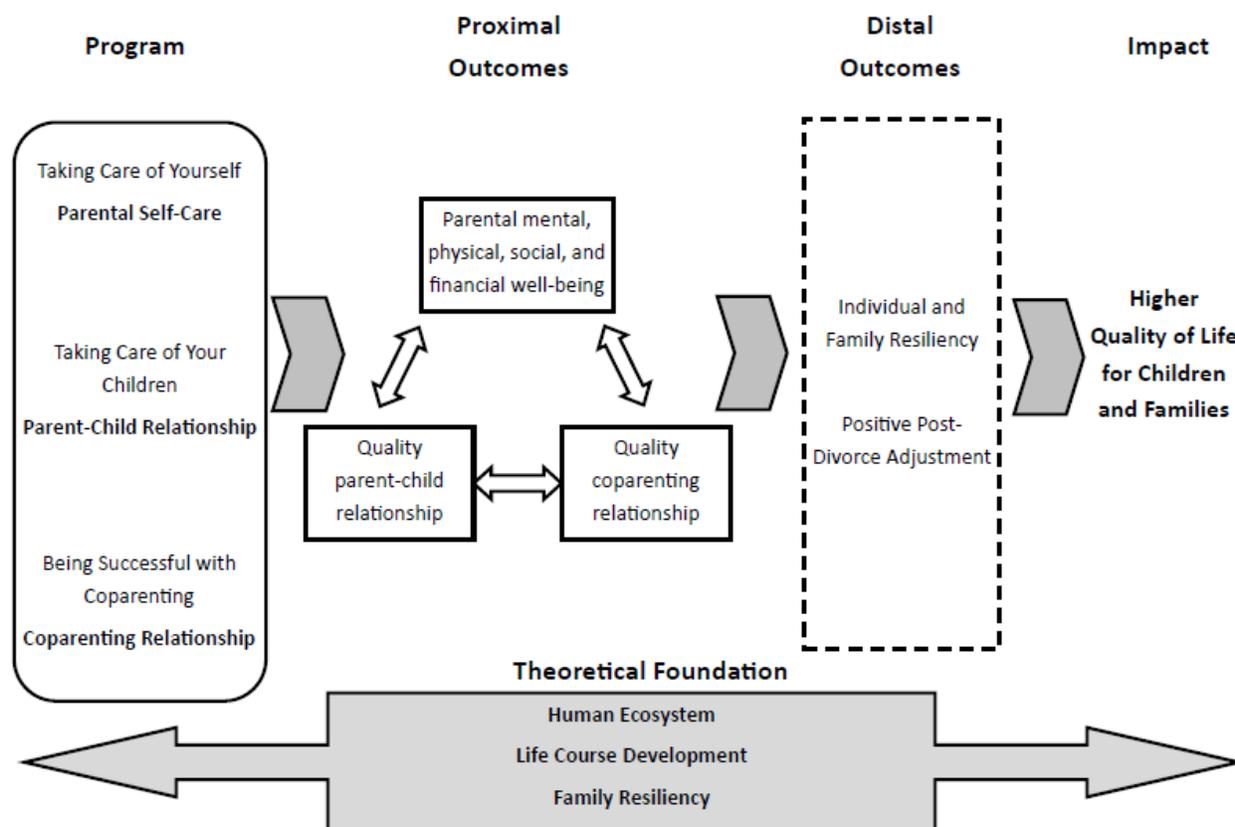
### **Parents Forever Program Theory**

Program theory explains how and why a program is expected to achieve its intended outcomes. It accomplishes this by explicitly articulating the mechanism by which the program is understood to contribute to the intended outcomes (Rogers, 2000). The value of explicating program theory is that it exposes often implicit theoretical program mediators (Donaldson, 2007). In an attempt to specify the theoretical mediators of the Parents Forever program, this manuscript presents its variable-oriented program impact theory. A variable-oriented approach has been recognized as providing an important bridge between theory and practice (Donaldson, 2007), which is particularly important for conducting rigorous evaluation studies.

To position Parents Forever for rigorous evaluation, its variable-oriented program theory is described. Parents Forever is theoretically-based and evidence-informed. Therefore, the program theory model outlines the program's theoretical basis and the empirical foundation (see Figure 1). In our description of the Parents Forever program theory, we begin by briefly describing the three major social science theories that serve as the theoretical foundation for the program theory (i.e., theoretical basis). Then, we describe the primary variables that serve as mediators and change mechanisms for the program as well as the accompanying empirical literature (i.e., evidence-informed).

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) programming is unique as our work extends across multiple content areas (i.e., family resource management, nutrition, child development, family dynamics). Nickols et al. (2009) described the FCS body of knowledge, which includes two theories—human ecosystems and life course development—which serve as the foundation for FCS programming. These two FCS theories are foundational for understanding and intervening in the divorce transition and are central theories that undergird Parents Forever. In addition to these underlying FCS theories, family resilience theory rounds out the theoretical foundation of the Parents Forever curriculum. Each of these foundational theories and their applicability within the context of families experiencing the divorce transition are briefly described.

*Figure 1. Parents Forever Program Theory Model*

**Human ecosystem.** Parents Forever emphasizes the interaction between person and environment, which is reflective of the human ecosystem model (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). This model recognizes that there are multiple levels of environments or systems that interact to foster individual and family development. The immediate setting consists of the closest physical, psychological, and social relationships and contexts and is referred to as the microsystem, whereas the broader environment, including societal norms, values, and policies, comprise the macrosystem. The relationship between these two systems and the intermediate systems has been described as a nested structure, similar to a set of Russian dolls (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Enduring and systematic interactions between the person and his or her environment are referred to as “proximal processes” and are recognized as the primary developmental mechanism (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Applying an understanding of the human ecosystem to families experiencing the divorce transition is critical as interactions within family sub-systems (i.e., coparent relationship) affect other sub-systems (i.e., parent-child relationship) and vice versa. Similarly, individual development, and therefore well-being, and the family system have a mutually influential relationship. Additionally, parents do not divorce and raise children in isolation. They are embedded in the ecologies of school, work, court, extended families, and larger communities. The connections between individuals in these ecologies are critical at any time but are made more so during experiences of transition and disruption, when existing relationships and supports may rapidly shift.

**Life course development.** Parents Forever is an intervention for families experiencing divorce and the subsequent family life transition and changes that follow. Life course development (Bengtson & Allen, 1993) refers to changes in individuals and families over the course of time (Nickols et al., 2009). The interaction between people and their social environments over time is central to this theory. Individuals' development influences their interactions with others as well as with social institutions, and similarly, social institutions create transition points for individuals as they develop (Elder, 1998). Individual and family development are mutually reinforcing as one cannot be understood outside the context of the other. Individual development is interconnected with the development and trajectories of parents, spouses, and children, which converge into the collective experience of "family" (Nickols et al., 2009). In the context of families, this theory focuses on family transitions through the life course. Whether family transitions are normative, such as the birth of a child, or non-normative, such as the untimely death of a parent, family life transitions result in stress as members move from familiar roles, rules, patterns of behavior, and interactions to the new and unfamiliar. Family life transitions, such as divorce, produce changes in the number of members, structure, and roles in each family, which results in new responsibilities, opportunities, and challenges (Price & McKenry, 2003). Parents Forever seeks to help families navigate a significant family life transition and make adjustments to a new family structure, roles, responsibilities, and interactions. However, adjustment to change is stressful, so promoting family strengths and resilience through this family life transition is essential.

**Family resiliency.** Parents Forever operates from a family resilience framework (Walsh, 2002), a strength-promoting orientation, which recognizes that most parents and families have or can be provided access to what they need to successfully transition through divorce and achieve optimal post-divorce adaptation. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) recognized that there is considerable variation in the definition and use of the term resilience. While this lack of consensus remains an issue, resilience is generally understood to be positive adaptation in the context of adversity. Family resilience emphasizes the adaptation and recovery of the whole family as a functional unit, rather than on the individuals (Walsh, 2016), and builds on family systems and family stress and coping theories (Patterson, 2002). Masten (2001, 2014) found that resilience arises from ordinary resources and processes. It is this very "ordinariness" that has shifted ideas about resilience as a static concept to the idea of resiliency as a process that can be developed and promoted (Hetherington & Blechman, 1996). Recent resilience research points to a prevention model such that "during a developmental transition or turning point, targeted interventions can be critically important in activating developmental cascades (i.e., progressive effects) that enhance multiple domains of functioning or deterring negative cascades of maladaptive behavior that could undermine adjustment" (Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013, p. 28). Parent education provided at key turning points can create ripples of resilience across systems and ecologies (Doty, Davis, & Arditti, 2017). Parents Forever was designed to be an example of a targeted intervention at a key developmental turning point in families' lives to prevent negative outcomes and promote resiliency for children, parents, and families.

These theories provide the overarching framework through which divorce as a family transition is understood. The human ecosystem model provides us with a framework for understanding how the family system (i.e., microsystem) is influenced during the divorce process as well as how other systems (meso- and macro-systems) influence the family experiencing the divorce transition. Life course development provides an explanation of how individual and family life transitions can result in trajectories that may lead individuals and families either to positive or negative adaptation. The family resilience framework provides a strengths-based orientation, which recognizes that strategically timed interventions (i.e., early in the divorce transition) that build, bridge, and bolster existing resources may change trajectories to promote individual and family well-being. In addition to these overarching social science theories that provide the theoretical foundation of Parents Forever, the program is predicated on a multiple-mediator model in which three mediators serve as proximal outcomes leading to the overall program outcome of a higher quality of life for children and families following the divorce transition. These change mechanisms are informed by concepts from the empirical literature.

### **Change Mechanisms**

The Parents Forever program focuses on three types of family relationships: (1) parents' relationship with themselves (i.e., self-care), (2) parents' relationship with their children, and (3) parents' coparenting relationship with one another (McCann, Lee, Powell, Hardman, & Becher, 2014). These three relationships are conceptualized as three change mechanisms: (1) parental self-care, (2) the parent-child relationship, and (3) the coparenting relationship, which have been identified in the empirical literature as critical mechanisms for positive post-divorce adjustment. These three core components are applicable across parenting contexts (i.e., divorced, married, unmarried, grandparents-raising-grandchildren). In this context, they are applied to families experiencing the divorce transition. The parent-child relationship and coparenting components of Parents Forever are common across divorce education curricula. In fact, most Extension programs that target separating and divorcing parents aim to help parents learn conflict resolution strategies, negotiate supportive parenting plans, and support their children's transition to a bi-nuclear family structure (Mulroy et al., 2013). What is unique to Parents Forever is the equal time devoted to promoting parental self-care as a means of enriching parental health and well-being and improving outcomes for children and parents experiencing family transition. The following section summarizes the theme of each of these curricular components and makes connections between the curricular content and relevant concepts and theories in the empirical and scholarly literature.

**Taking care of yourself.** The first major curricular component, Taking Care of Yourself, helps parents understand the need to take care of themselves in order to effectively help their children through a family transition (McCann, Lee, & Powell, 2014; McCann, Lee, Powell, Hardman, & Becher, 2014). The objectives for this section are that parents are able to (a) describe thoughts and feelings associated with the family transition process, (b) examine the links between self-

care and life skills needed during and after the family transition and (c) analyze how personal needs and wants affect goals and create an action plan for the future. The core idea is that parents are best able to meet their children's needs and engage in a constructive coparenting relationship if they are taking care of themselves and having their own needs met as well.

Caring for one's emotional and physical health is one of the most important, and often neglected, things that parents must do to be effective caregivers, particularly during times of transition. Disruptions in the family system can sometimes increase financial and emotional stress for parents, adversely affecting their attentiveness and sensitivity to their children (Cox & Harter, 2003). Three overarching areas addressed in this section of the curriculum are highlighted below, including financial stability and stable environment, social support, and emotional and physical health and well-being. Each of these quality of life indicators is briefly discussed along with linkages to the literature and examples in the curriculum.

*Financial stability and stable environment.* Parents Forever defines financial stability and a stable environment as interconnected concepts. Financial and environmental instability are risk factors associated with families experiencing divorce. While some contradictory findings exist (e.g., Braver & O'Connell, 1998), most scholars report that divorce substantially reduces the standard of living for custodial parents and children, and to a lesser extent, the nonresident parent (Bartfeld, 2000). Evidence points to a relationship between a lack of financial resources and negative parenting. For example, a parent may develop depressive symptoms due to stress from their financial inability to provide a stable environment for themselves and their child (Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, & Heim, 2013). This creates an accumulation of risk factors where a child is not only exposed to financial hardship and/or an unstable environment, but their key protective factor of quality parenting is being affected (Appleyard & Osofsky, 2003; Osofsky & Thompson, 2000).

In this section of the curriculum, parents are directed to understand their financial situation and the subsequent emotional and social ramifications they may be experiencing. They are walked through strategies for budgeting and saving and how to critically think through their priority list when financial resources are limited. Several resources are offered, ranging from calculating costs associated with raising children to paying down debt. Subsections focus on how to expect the unexpected in terms of anticipating emergencies and understanding child support.

*Social support.* Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2004) recognizes that development is the result of an interaction between process, person, context, and time. While the bioecological model emphasizes the processes, role of the biological person, and the element of time, consistent with his original theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the external context of the individual and family (i.e., extended family, neighborhoods, larger community, and broader societal systems) is viewed as important for both resources and support. Cohen (2004) defines social support as the psychological and material resources available within a network that

enable an individual to cope with stress. There are three sources of social support identified in the literature: emotional, informational, and instrumental/practical (Thoits, 2011). Emotional support is reflected through positive affective communication; informational support encompasses facts, advice, and feedback; and instrumental/practical support is about being present to help with a problem such as helping someone move or lending them money.

The Parents Forever curriculum provides information about the divorce process, including a substantial legal section, and exposes parents to new perspectives and courses of action that may improve their family's adjustment to the divorce (i.e., instrumental support). The curriculum also encourages parents to utilize and build the existing social support network that they have available to them by investing in friendships and family relationships, which are often the most reliable sources of emotional and practical support. Parents are also encouraged to connect to social support services, such as joining support groups for divorcees, becoming involved in activities offered by local churches or neighborhood organizations, and taking advantage of parks or gyms which offer space for exercise and relaxation. An important element of parental self-care is the ability to mobilize relationships and resources available to support parents experiencing the divorce transition.

*Emotional and physical health.* Emotional and physical health are addressed through four subsections in the curriculum: (1) the emotional side of family transition, (2) dealing with anger, (3) managing stress, and (4) staying safe. Throughout the curriculum, the impact of difficult emotions (i.e., anger, stress) on physical health is discussed, and strategies are offered for finding a healthy balance of individual coping while simultaneously balancing the needs of a complex family system. Participants are provided information about some of the common emotions and types of losses they might experience during the divorce process. This is integrated with Kubler-Ross's stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) and the cycles of grief and emotional understanding outlined by Emery (2012). Grief is contextualized within a broader resilience framework that highlights, for instance, the varied potential pathways that people take when exposed to loss (Bonanno, 2004).

Ambiguous loss is highlighted as a potential emotional experience that parents (and children) may go through. Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs without closure or understanding (Boss, 2013b). When families experience divorce, family roles and boundaries change but sometimes in unclear or hard to define ways. There may be "uncertainty over how they should grieve the loss of a family member who is alive, yet somehow absent from their lives" (Afifi & Keith, 2004). For individuals and families experiencing the divorce transition, there may be a period of time when several members of the family experience ambiguous loss (Boss, 2013a, 2013b). The goal of the new family structure is to find the meaning of the loss while moving forward within their feelings of ambiguity (Boss, 2013a). To facilitate this process, participants are invited to contemplate the potential gains of their divorce experience rather than simply reflect on the

losses. This represents some of the influence of the positive psychology movement (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Anger and stress are both common and impactful experiences during the divorce process, and at times are normative, and at times need professional intervention. They are important concepts to address but even more so for individuals living in abusive contexts either as perpetrators or victims. In their meta-analysis of divorce education programs, Fackrell et al. (2011) reported a serious lack of curriculum addressing domestic violence. Women are at higher risk of assault and death by abusive partners during separation (Campbell et al., 2003). To address this evidence from the literature and the reality that both women and men can be victims, domestic violence was intentionally created as a stand-alone section (Staying Safe During Family Transition) to reflect the seriousness of the issue and its all too common-place occurrence during the separation and divorce process. This is particularly important to address due to the change in social and judicial attitudes regarding shared custody (Hardesty, 2002) and the risk to victims of abuse to be forced into shared custody arrangements (Hardesty & Chung, 2006).

The Taking Care of Yourself section of the curriculum addresses the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual needs of parents and draws on literature that connects the well-being of parents to their ability to parent and coparent effectively. Emphasis is on adapting to the family transition triggered by the divorce process by developing healthy coping skills, achieving and maintaining a stable environment, and establishing a new normal. Parents often set the emotional tone for their children, so parental self-care following a family transition such as divorce is an important way to care for their children as well.

**Taking care of your children.** The second major component of the Parents Forever curriculum, Taking Care of Your Children, helps parents assess how their children are dealing with the divorce and what supports they need (McCann, Lee, & Powell, 2014; McCann, Lee, Powell, Hardman, & Becher, 2014). This section of the curriculum focuses on the nature of the parent-child relationship, the second change mechanism in the program theory. The primary objectives listed in the Parents Forever Educator Guide are that parents will be able to (a) recognize how child development influences children's journey through the transition, (b) identify characteristics of parent-child relationships that improve child well-being, and (c) apply knowledge and identify skills that will lead to improved parent-child relationships. Two overarching areas in this section are parents as protective factors and developmental stage theories; each will be highlighted along with pertinent literature below.

*Parents as protective factors.* The Taking Care of Your Children curricular component is primarily concerned with addressing parent-child relationships. In recognition of the influence of resilience research, the parent-child relationship is highlighted as a key protective factor for children. In particular, positive parent-child relationships affect children's adaptive behaviors, while negative changes in parent-child relationships are associated with children's problem

behaviors (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003). Research also indicates that children with strong parental ties experience fewer internalizing and externalizing disorders (King & Sobolewski, 2006).

Cox and Harter (2003) conducted a brief review of the empirical and theoretical literature regarding parent-child relationships and identified that a sensitive and responsive child-centered relationship between parent and child is critical for the positive development of children. In these kinds of relationships, parents are attentive to the characteristics and developmental stage of each child and adapt their parenting behaviors to monitor, guide, and support their children in responsive ways. Sensitive and responsive parenting are connected to the literature on caregiver sensitivity, responsiveness, and attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989).

During discussion of parenting as a protective factor, the classes incorporate content on Parenting Styles (Baumrind, 1966) and factors that affect how one parents. This section explains that there are many different factors in a parent's life that influence how one parents his or her children, including formal and informal education on parenting; life experiences; cultural and religious beliefs; and the environment in which the children are being raised. Parents reflect on how these factors shape their parenting. The class then goes into the four basic styles of parenting (i.e., authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, neglectful; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) that represent varying combinations of two elements, parental responsiveness and parental demandingness. Although parents employ all of the parenting styles at one time or another, they tend to parent primarily using one approach. The parenting style used with each child lays the foundation for the parent-child relationship but does not determine it. Caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness reflect the parents' ability to use their child's cues and respond appropriately while, in turn, continuing to build a strong parent-child relationship (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

*Developmental stage theories.* Developmental stage theories propose a linear, universal process of development that associates chronological age with a sequence of developmental stages. Stages are periods of time in one's development in which biological, psychological, and social forces interact to promote the growth of the individual (Burrow-Sanchez & March, 2005). As such, stage theories of development provide a framework for guiding expectations of developmentally appropriate behavior. Two of the most well-known stage theories are Piaget's Cognitive Development theory (Piaget, 1954) and Erikson's Psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1950). Although specific developmental stage theories are not discussed in detail in the curriculum, the concept of ages and stages serves as the backdrop for discussions on parent-child relationships and allows participants to analyze how their children may be experiencing their separation or divorce according to each child's developmental stage. By integrating both attachment literature and developmental stage theories, this section addresses parenting behaviors that can be employed through interactions with children to bolster the parent-child relationship throughout the changing ecologies of the divorce transition.

The Taking Care of Your Children section of the curriculum draws on stage theories of child development to help parents determine how best to support their children through the divorce transition. Additionally, it draws on research about caregiver responsiveness and sensitivity and describes parenting styles as a framework for understanding interactions between parents and their children. The curricular content in the section aims to strengthen the parent-child relationship by educating parents about the developmental stage of their child and the important role that parents can serve as protective factors for their children, particularly during times of disruption, stress, and change.

**Being successful with coparenting.** The third and final component of Parents Forever, Being Successful with Coparenting, helps parents' explore coparenting skills and successfully form a parenting partnership with their children's other parent (McCann, Lee, & Powell, 2014; McCann, Lee, Powell, Hardman, & Becher, 2014). This section of the curriculum aims to influence the third mechanism in the program theory, the coparental relationship. The objectives listed in the educator guide are that parents will be able to (a) discuss the nature of coparenting relationships and reflect on how this information applies to their current situation, (b) apply the communication and conflict management skills needed to have an effective coparenting relationship, and (c) recognize how a parenting plan is a tool to help prepare for positive coparenting. It teaches parents the importance of coparenting together, even though they are no longer romantically involved. This section of the curriculum provides strategies and other resources to help parents develop healthy coparenting relationships, which is important and beneficial to children during and following separation or divorce.

Coparenting is defined as the way that parents or parental figures share the duties of parenting and how they relate to one another in their parental roles (Feinberg, 2003). Coparenting involves coordinating and carrying out parenting activities when individuals have shared responsibility for raising particular children. Optimal coparenting is cooperative and involves support, shared responsibilities, and minimization of conflict. The "co" in coparenting does not necessarily mean that parents will or should have equal authority or responsibilities in regard to child rearing; rather, parents must negotiate the degree of equality in their coparenting relationship based on their family's unique needs and circumstances (Feinberg, 2003). It incorporates three central features: (a) the quality of teamwork and support between parents, (b) the amount of discord between the parents in their endeavors, and (c) the degree to which parents are involved in the care and upbringing of their child(ren); Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; McHale 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004).

There is a substantial amount of emerging theory based on recent evidence that has informed the Parents Forever curriculum. Specifically, Parents Forever describes four coparenting strategies and facilitates participant reflection on their current coparenting strategy and what coparenting strategy they aspire to have with their child's other parent (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The curriculum highlights how one parent's conflict with the child's other parent can become a

significant deterrent for non-residential parent involvement (Arendell, 1996) and how custodial parent's decision-making, or gatekeeping, about non-residential parent-child communication and parenting time can affect long-term positive outcomes for children in most situations. The curriculum also explores the dyadic and polyadic nature of coparenting. Whereas dyadic refers to two parents, polyadic coparenting refers to the multiple individuals in a child's life who fulfill parenting roles (e.g., grandparents, stepparents; McConnell, Lauretti, Khazan, & McHale, 2003; McHale et al., 2004). Building upon its previous parent-child relationship content of developmental ages and stages, and children's individual differences, Parents Forever describes how coparenting can influence and be influenced by the unique traits of each child in the family.

In addition, the coparenting component of the curriculum offers practical insights and skills on communication and conflict management. This is particularly relevant as tension, resentment, and anger can linger after divorce and affect the coparenting relationship (Arendell, 1996). In the years to come, parents will experience childrearing and other parenting tasks that require civility and varying degrees of cooperation. Building a constructive coparenting relationship can be a formidable undertaking for some parents post-divorce, but it is shown to improve outcomes for their children (Ahrons, 2007; Whiteside, 1998).

The Being Successful with Coparenting section draws from literature regarding the coparenting alliance. It provides coparenting strategies that may be useful for parents to learn regarding how to parent with one another outside the context of marriage or a romantic relationship. Because partnering and parenting often go hand in hand, parents often struggle to parent together outside the context of a partnership. The aim of this section of the curriculum is to help parents avoid putting their children in the middle and learn how to engage in shared parenting that will benefit their children.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Parents Forever is a unique divorce education curriculum in its emphasis on parental self-care as an equal mediator of child outcomes in addition to parent-child and coparenting relationships. Parents Forever is explicitly influenced by the theoretical and empirical literature emerging from multiple domains, creating a strengths-based, ecologically grounded, dynamic program. Parents Forever is still growing and changing in reflection of an organizational framework influenced by family science theories, research evidence, and evaluation findings. The heart of the Parents Forever theory of change is rooted in the belief that child, parental, and family outcomes are mediated by parental self-care, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the quality of the coparent relationship. Consistent with the nature of Extension educational programming, by intervening in a critical stage of the divorce process, we can change behaviors and practices, which may impact families' trajectories and outcomes.

Evaluations of the Parents Forever program have found behavior change consistent with the anticipated outcomes of the program. Improvements in cooperation, communication, and

emotional well-being of parents and children, as well as reduction of conflict in front of the children, have been reported based on in-person delivery of the program (Dworkin & Karahan, 2005). A recent quasi-experimental design evaluation study found positive program effects for several variables related to parenting practices, adult quality of life, self-efficacy, and parent report of child outcomes (Becher et al., 2018). Additionally, recent evaluations of Parents Forever delivered online showed that at follow-up parents have reported significant improvements related to postdivorce parenting and wellbeing (Becher et al., 2015; Cronin, Becher, McCann, McGuire, & Powell, 2017), indicating that the online version of Parents Forever may be effective in promoting positive behavioral change for parents. Next steps for the program include comparing delivery models (i.e., in-person to online) and more rigorous experimental research on the effectiveness of Parents Forever. The results of these future evaluations will then ideally inform policy about state mandates for divorce education curriculum as well as continuous program improvement. The intent of this article was to explicate the intellectual foundation of Parents Forever and describe its contribution to the field of divorce education as a part of a larger programmatic effort to move towards more rigorous evaluation design.

The Parents Forever program theory for divorce education advances a rationale for incorporating content on parental self-care, as well as parent-child and coparenting relationships, into state court mandates for education during separation and divorce. Consistent with the theoretical framework outlined, parental self-care and quality of life are critical factors in child-outcomes and affect the ability of parents to engage in changes to their parent-child and coparenting relationships. Although researchers have found that participants attending parent education programs may reach a point of diminishing returns for programs in excess of 12 hours (Payne & McDonald, 2014), we argue that less content and fewer hours are unlikely to create more positive outcomes for children, particularly if salient content areas related to parental self-care are absent. As the movement towards brief divorce education continues to grow (e.g., Brandon, 2006), it is critical that programs like Parents Forever that incorporate more content be compared to briefer programs to assess both effectiveness and impact in rigorously designed evaluations. Ideally, future evaluation studies of Parents Forever and other divorce education programs will incorporate the factors that Fackrell et al. (2011) identified as missing in their meta-analysis of divorce education programs: observational assessments, experimental design, long-term outcome measurement, and the incorporation of moderators that potentially affect program impact.

### **Conclusion**

Program theory is the critical link between social problems and social service programs intended to alleviate them. Articulating program theory through explication of the social science empirical and theoretical literature base enhances the likelihood of achieving intended results and impacting social conditions. Indeed, articulating program theory as a means to identify testable causal links has been identified as being increasingly important for Extension programming

(Arnold, 2015; Arnold & Cater, 2016). The need to strategically position Parents Forever within the field of divorce education, which is becoming more theoretically explicit and increasingly evidence-based, made it an appropriate illustrative case advocating the important role that program theory plays in the design and evaluation of parent and family education programs as well as Extension programs generally. Thoughtful linkage of program theory and social science theory contributes to both program evaluation and the broader social science literature (Riggin, 1990). In the fields of parent and family education and within Extension, we must become more vigilant in our attempts to link social science theory and research with program theory to develop and deliver programs that are theoretically and empirically sound and validated through rigorous evaluation.

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