

# Effects of the Dads for Life Intervention on Interparental Conflict and Coparenting in the Two Years After Divorce

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*The ability of parents to forge harmonious coparenting relationships following divorce is an important predictor of their children's long-term well-being. However, there is no convincing evidence that this relationship can be modified through intervention. A preventive intervention that we developed, Dads for Life (DFL), which targeted noncustodial parents as participants, has previously been shown in a randomized field trial to favorably impact child well-being. We explore here whether it also has an impact on mothers' and fathers' perceptions of coparenting and interparental conflict in the 2 years following divorce. Results of the latent growth curve models we evaluated showed that both mothers and fathers reported less conflict when the father participated in DFL as compared with controls. For the fathers, perceptions of coparenting did not change over time in either the DFL or control conditions. Alternatively, mothers' perceptions of support declined over time in the control group, whereas those whose ex-husbands participated in the DFL program reported significant positive growth change toward healthier coparenting. The positive findings for mothers' reports are particularly compelling because mothers were not the participants, and thus common alternative explanations are ruled out. The DFL intervention, then, offers courts a promising program to improve families' functioning after divorce.*

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Approximately 1 in 5 adults will divorce in their lifetimes (Kreider, 2005), and although only about half of all divorces occur in families with children, it is predicted that over 1 million children a year experience parental divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Over the past three decades, a compelling body of evidence has emerged to document that children who are exposed to parent divorce compared with those from nondivorce families are at higher risk for a host of problematic outcomes, including depression, anxiety, school dropout, aggression, and delinquency (Amato & Keith, 1991). Although these findings suggest a trend for adverse reactions, there is considerable variation in how children adjust and which aspects of their lives are affected. In one meta-analysis (Amato & Keith), the postdivorce relationships of children with their noncustodial parents were strongly influenced ( $d = -.25$ ), whereas rates of psychiatric diagnosis were only minimally affected ( $d = -.09$ ).

Interparental conflict has been repeatedly implicated in problematic adjustment for children (Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2005; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Children who are exposed to heightened levels of conflict between parents are at increased risk for behavior and emotion problems (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Vandervalk, Spruijt, de Goede, Meeus, & Maas, 2004) and are more likely to experience disruptions in their relations with each parent (Amato, 2003; Grych, 2005). Further, whether the mother and the father can effectively cooperate as coparents has emerged as an important, if not the most important, determinant of a child's ultimate level of well-being (Adamsons & Pasley, 2005; Ahrons, 1981; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; McBride & Rane, 1997; Whiteside, 1998).

Because of its theoretical, practical, and legal significance, it is natural that interventions have frequently been aimed at reducing interparental conflict and boosting coparenting. Although this may commonly be the aim of therapeutic efforts with individual clients, of greater interest here are formal programs with that goal.

The target has proved rather elusive. According to a recent review by Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, and Braver (2004), there is not a single randomized study in the published literature reporting statistically significant intervention effects on interparental conflict. Two nonrandomized studies that provided program evaluation efficacy results for a parent education program aimed at affecting coparenting also found no significant differences in program participants and control families after participation (Douglas, 2004; McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999). Only one program evaluated with a weaker, nonrandomized design (Children in the Middle; Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis, & Hoza, 1998) found any plausible evidence of effects on the interparental relationship, but this effect was limited to the period immediately after the program and had dissipated 3 months later.

A program we devised and have been evaluating, Dads for Life (DFL; Braver & Griffin, 2000), was aimed at helping children of divorce by working with their noncustodial fathers. It was designed to complement a program developed by our colleagues for custodial mothers, New Beginnings, that has demonstrated program effects 5 years after the intervention (Wolchik et al., 2002). The DFL program was

evaluated in a randomized design and, like New Beginnings, was found to produce significant beneficial effects on children's adjustment and well-being in analyses published elsewhere (Braver, Griffin, & Cookston, 2005; Braver, Griffin, Cookston, Sandler, & Williams, 2005). However, because DFL contained substantial content devoted to reducing interparental conflict and increasing coparenting, unlike New Beginnings, we explore in this article whether the program *also* had effects on the latter outcomes, and on child well-being. To accomplish this evaluation, we employ a state-of-the-art statistical analysis, latent growth curve modeling (LGM), to probe the program's effect on interparental relations postdivorce. We begin with a general description of the DFL program, followed by a detailed description of its focus on the interparental relationship. Then we provide a description of the evaluation study, a short "primer" on LGM methodology, and an analysis and discussion of results. As will be seen, DFL appears to have a strong positive effect on coparenting and interparental conflict and is thus the first and only program shown in an experimental trial to reduce conflict and promote coparenting among divorced parents.

### **The Dads for Life Preventive Intervention for Noncustodial Fathers**

Dads for Life is an intervention for noncustodial fathers intended to reduce the risks of divorce for children by working with fathers to affect two main "proximal outcomes," or mediating relationships. First, we sought to improve the father-child relationship by increasing the father's parenting skills and motivation for high-quality parenting. Second, we tried to influence the father-mother relationship—to decrease conflict, especially that witnessed by the child, and to promote better coparental behaviors. The program included eight group sessions lasting 1 hour and 45 minutes, co-led by a male and a female master's level facilitator, and two 45-minute one-on-one sessions. The content of the group sessions was highly scripted to promote fidelity of program implementation, and the leaders were trained to promote discussion while participants progressed through the curriculum. In addition to the scripted course content, a professionally made film entitled *Eight Short Films About Divorced Fathers* was produced that presented ethnically diverse professional child and adult actors in a series of scenes that highlighted the themes of the sessions. A different 10-minute segment was shown at each of the eight group sessions and focused on the ideas presented in the session. Videotape programs are likely to be (1) more cost effective (Webster-Stratton, 1984), (2) have greater potential for easy dissemination (Jackson & Aiken, 2006), and (3) involve less threat to the integrity of the intervention across replications (Kalichman, Cherry, & Browne-Sperling, 1999).

Of the eight group sessions and two individual sessions, about half were devoted to the parent-child relationship, providing content on parenting skills such as listening, communication, and effective discipline. The other half of the program was devoted to reducing interparental conflict, and to introduction and review.

### **Randomized Evaluation Trial of DFL**

Potential participants were identified through the court divorce and child support records of Maricopa County, Arizona. All files in the time period were searched to determine whether the family was eligible to participate. Eligibility criteria we employed were: (1) the couple had divorced within the past 4–10 months (so that couples

were still in the early stages of divorce, before practices and patterns had hardened); (2) there was at least one child aged between 4 and 12 years old (the age range for whom the parenting skills component of DFL was appropriate); (3) the mother had primary physical custody (because the parenting skills component of DFL was designed to fit the circumstances of a father who was not the primary custodial parent; joint legal custody couples were eligible, however, and constituted over half the sample); and (4) both parents lived within an hour of the data collection team (to facilitate the in-home interview assessments). Initially, 5,968 such couples met these criteria and were mailed recruitment materials, including, for the fathers, a short (7-minute) persuasive and vivid videotape. We then attempted to contact by telephone both the mother (to obtain permission to interview her about her child and to obtain her permission to interview the child if the child was 7 or older and, if the child was of school age, to mail an assessment form to the child's teacher), and the father (to offer him the chance to be randomly assigned to DFL or control conditions, and the assessment procedures). During recruitment, parents were offered \$20 each to participate in each 45-minute telephone survey. To protect confidentiality, neither parent was ever informed by us that the other was participating or had declined the opportunity. Families were told in advance about the follow-up assessments and tentatively volunteered to participate in these as well.

If one parent informed us that he or she was uninterested or ineligible, we discontinued efforts to recruit the other because our protocol required both the reports of father and mother on the assessment battery. Of the fathers, we were successful in contacting 1,489 by phone. After explaining the potential benefits of participation, they were cautioned to decline participation unless they could commit to complete whichever of the two conditions (DFL or the home study control condition) randomness (an actual lottery) dictated; 695 (47%) agreed to participate in either and to accept random assignment to either condition. After eliminating some of these families based on the mother's subsequent refusal to be interviewed or on an inability, for one reason or another, to actually conduct the pretest interview on the mother, father, or the eligible child, 357 fathers and mothers were pretest interviewed, and the fathers were scheduled for random assignment at an "orientation meeting." At the orientation, to minimize self-selection bias and attrition, the fathers were asked to indicate whether they had a strong preference to be assigned to one of the two conditions, and the 48 fathers who indicated an extreme preference were not randomized to DFL and dropped from the evaluation. Another 85 ultimately refused to participate, were incapable of attending orientation, or failed to show up as scheduled. Ten more we determined could not implement the program, and so were excluded, leaving 214 randomized fathers. A true lottery system in which the father drew a lot to determine assignment to condition (with unequal numbers of lots) was used; 127 fathers were assigned to the DFL condition, and 87 were assigned to the control group. Of the fathers assigned to DFL, 11 (8.7%) never attended, 18 (14.2%) attrited from the group, and 98 (77.2%) completed the program. For the purposes of the analyses presented here, we assumed an intent-to-treat (ITT) orientation to the fathers who attrited from the program, and their scores remained in the DFL group.

Ethnicity of participants was largely European American descent (86% of fathers and 88% of mothers), followed by Hispanics (5% of fathers, 5% of mothers), African Americans (3% of fathers and 1% of mothers), and Asian Americans (1% of fathers, 4% of mothers), among others. The largest group of parents (30% of fathers, 38% of

mothers) had completed some college but had not received a degree, 18% of fathers and 19% of mothers had a 2-year degree, 23% of fathers and 22% of mothers had completed a 4-year degree, and 17% of fathers and 7% of mothers had an advanced degree. At Wave 1, less than a quarter of the fathers reported an annual gross income less than \$18,000, with the median income reported as \$42,000, and the top quarter of participants' income starting at \$66,000. Mothers' Wave 1 gross annual income varied more than fathers' income, with the median income listed at \$24,000 per year, and the top quarter starting at approximately \$35,000.

Fathers assigned at random to the self-study placebo control condition, which we described for them as the "home version" of DFL, received by mail a repackaged copy of the pages of the two best self-help books available at the time, *Divorced Fathers: Reconstructing a Quality Life* (Oakland, 1984) and *Divorced Dad Dilemma* (Mayer, 1994). These books offer practical advice to divorced fathers on four major areas: (1) personal life adjustment, (2) improvement of existing relationships with children, (3) establishment of a separate home, and (4) constructive methods for handling legal matters connected with divorce.

Assessment of participants occurred at four time points: pretest (before assignment to program group), immediately following the program (3 months after the pretest), 4 months after the posttest (7 months after the pretest), and 1 year after the program (15 months after the baseline assessment). To facilitate the follow-up interviews, we had initially requested from each parent the names and telephone numbers of "tracers," individuals who would likely always know their whereabouts and who could help us contact them later. Mothers and fathers participated in all waves of measurement in 132 (61.7%) families, with 177 (82.7%) both completing Wave 2, 164 (76.6%) both completing Wave 3, and 149 (69.9%) both completing Wave 4. These rates of attrition are low in relation to the high percentage of families that have been lost in similar studies (Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

In addition to both mothers and fathers, if children were between the ages of 4 and 12 years old, they were interviewed on the well-being measures reported elsewhere (Braver, Griffin, & Cookston, 2005; Braver, Griffin, Cookston, Sandler, & Williams, 2005). In the final sample, 120 children were interviewed at Wave 1 ( $M$  age = 10.01,  $SD$  = 1.47), 99 were interviewed at Wave 2 ( $M$  age = 10.32,  $SD$  = 1.45), 92 were retained at Wave 3 ( $M$  age = 10.77,  $SD$  = 1.53), and 79 completed Wave 4 ( $M$  age = 11.27,  $SD$  = 1.40). A total of 58% of the children sampled at Wave 1 were female.

## Measures

*Coparenting.* The coparental relationship was measured by five items adapted from Dumka, Prost, and Barrera (2002) that assessed how the couple functioned as a parenting team. Items included working together to find ways to handle problems with the child, communicating about the children's needs, talking about how to coparent, trusting the judgment of the former spouse to solve problems with the child, and creating a united front for the children. Values on these items were summed to create a scale score. Mothers and fathers were each asked these questions at each of the four waves of measurement. For both mothers and fathers, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the five items ranged from a low of .91 on the Wave 1 measures to a high of .93 at Wave 4.

*Interparental conflict.* Parent conflict was assessed by 13 items adapted for parent report from the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPICS; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Mothers and fathers responded to item stems that assessed the frequency and intensity of the parents' conflict and whether conflict events tend to be resolved. The 13 items were summed for each reporter to create a scale score for each reporter at each of the four waves. The scales were composed of internally consistent items that had coefficient alphas that ranged between .86 and .90.

## RESULTS

### Means and Correlations of Study Variables

Table 1 contains the bivariate correlations among the study variables. As can be seen, correlations within reporter and across waves are very high (the shaded correlations), ranging from .54 to .82, suggesting substantial stability of each couple's relative standing. Correlations between mothers' and fathers' coparenting scores at each wave (the boxed coefficients) are also substantial, ranging from  $r = .57$  at Wave 1 to .64 at Wave 3, suggesting substantial corroboration of the separate reports of the two parents. Mother's and father's reports of conflict are also moderately correlated (also boxed), but a bit less so than their coparenting scores. As is to be expected, coparenting and conflict are consistently and substantially negatively associated. The means of the variables are also reported in Table 1, and a matched  $t$  test of father's and mother's mean is reported in the last column. The only variable for which a significant difference between the two parents' ratings was found for Wave 1 coparenting, fathers reported significantly higher scores than mothers,  $t(211) = 2.86, p < .01$ . The trends in the means across waves are assessed in the next sections.

### A Brief Primer on Latent Growth Models

In this study, we explore how mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the coparenting relationship change in the 2 years following divorce for DFL and control conditions based on data from four waves of measurement. Latent growth curve models (LGM) are a new and powerful statistical technique appropriate for such a purpose (Muthen & Curran, 1997). Because many readers may not be familiar with the technique, we provide a brief primer here. LGM is a variant of structural equation modeling (SEM) that is well-suited for modeling change over time within participants. SEM assumes that observed measurements are empirical manifestations of unobservable "true" latent quantities. In the present case, for example, we assume the actual, true, or latent values of coparenting can't be directly measured but can be approximated or estimated by the parents' reports. The latent values are assumed to progress in a straight line over time (an assumption that is tested by the "goodness of fit" of the model). What is important to quantify, then, is the slope of this "latent growth" over the time of measurement, and where each family begins this growth at the initial time of measurement (the "initial status," or intercept).

Curran and Muthen (1999; see also Muthen & Curran, 1997) provided a detailed explanation of how LGM technique can be adapted to assess the impact of an experimental intervention, such as DFL, on the growth patterns. They proposed a three-step analysis plan in which the analyst first models the latent growth among the participants of the control (unintervened) group, which they termed "normative

TABLE 1  
Means and Bivariate Correlations of Coparenting and Interparental Conflict Scores, by Wave and Reporter

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	Mean	<i>t</i> test of Father-Mother difference
1. Wave 1 Coparenting Mother	.72	.74	.66	.57	.51	.55	.51	-.44	-.33	-.26	-.30	-.35	-.23	-.30	-.24	14.58	2.86*
2. Wave 2 Coparenting Mother	.80	.73	.53	.61	.63	.56	.56	-.46	-.50	-.41	-.43	-.32	-.39	-.35	-.29	15.49	1.47
3. Wave 3 Coparenting Mother	.81	.54	.62	.64	.59	.59	.59	-.50	-.50	-.49	-.43	-.44	-.47	-.44	-.31	15.48	1.08
4. Wave 4 Coparenting Mother	.56	.63	.60	.61	.61	.61	.61	-.47	-.45	-.44	-.47	-.39	-.33	-.34	-.28	16.23	.55
5. Wave 1 Coparenting Father	.80	.75	.72	.80	.75	.72	.72	-.42	-.36	-.29	-.32	-.48	-.36	-.37	-.34	15.66	----
6. Wave 2 Coparenting Father	.82	.78	.82	.78	.78	.78	.78	-.39	-.39	-.37	-.36	-.46	-.48	-.51	-.41	16.08	----
7. Wave 3 Coparenting Father	.78	.78	.78	.78	.78	.78	.78	-.48	-.46	-.45	-.38	-.49	-.46	-.58	-.43	15.90	----
8. Wave 4 Coparenting Father	-.45	-.41	-.40	-.41	-.40	-.41	-.41	-.39	-.37	-.50	-.48	-.37	-.50	-.48	-.48	16.47	----
9. Wave 1 InterParental Conflict Mother	.78	.68	.67	.78	.68	.67	.67	.52	.37	.39	.42	.37	.39	.42	.42	20.43	.23
10. Wave 2 InterParental Conflict Mother	.76	.75	.42	.51	.39	.33	.42	.51	.39	.33	.42	.43	.42	.42	.42	18.44	-1.39
11. Wave 3 InterParental Conflict Mother	.79	.41	.48	.43	.42	.42	.42	.35	.39	.33	.40	.35	.39	.33	.40	17.74	.13
12. Wave 4 InterParental Conflict Mother	.62	.65	.54	.54	.54	.54	.54	.62	.65	.54	.54	.62	.65	.54	.54	20.53	----
13. Wave 1 InterParental Conflict Father	.67	.62	.62	.62	.62	.62	.62	.67	.62	.62	.62	.67	.62	.62	.62	17.89	----
14. Wave 2 InterParental Conflict Father	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	17.79	----
15. Wave 3 InterParental Conflict Father	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	17.79	----
16. Wave 4 InterParental Conflict Father	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57	17.18	----

*N* for correlations ranges from 213 to 144 all correlations significant at  $p < .01$ .  
\* $p < .01$ .

growth.” The growth curve in the control group alone affords the researcher an opportunity to obtain knowledge about the initial status, slope, and variability among participants who were not exposed to the experimental condition. For the slope latent factor, one uses as “weights” the time (in our case, in months since the first measurement, the pretest) in which the measurement occurred. Thus, in our case, these weights are 0, 3 (for the immediate posttest), 7 (the 4-month follow-up), and 15 (for the one-year follow up). Second, one assesses the growth model just for the experimental group participants to estimate the change over time of those who participated in the intervention. Finally, one assesses a “multiple-group” growth model that assumes any difference is due to a second, or “treatment growth,” factor that accounts for the unique changes in growth possibly experienced by the experimental group. If this second growth factor is significantly greater than zero, one attributes it to the impact of the program.

### Latent Growth Curve Modeling of DFL's Impact on Coparenting

Based on the substantial correlations between mother's and father's reports of coparenting, we initially hoped to combine the two parents' reports into a single variable. However, the goodness of fit for such a model was poor, indicating that father's and mother's growth patterns were too dissimilar to be combined, so we separated them in all subsequent analyses. Taking mother's report first, in accordance with the Curran and Muthen (1999) recommended analysis strategy (using M-PLUS v2.13), first we fit a latent curve model to mother's reports of coparenting in the control group. The straight-line model showed very high goodness of fit. The two standard criteria of goodness of fit are a low and nonsignificant chi-square (ours was 1.49 and not significant) and a near-zero root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; ours was .01.) The mean and variance of the intercept latent factor were both significantly different from zero ( $M = 16, p < .05$ ;  $\sigma = 34.7, p < .05$ ). These results for the intercept factor suggest that substantial individual differences exist among members of the control group in their initial perceptions of coparenting. Only the mean was significant for the growth factor, and it was negative ( $M = -.10, p < .05$ ), whereas the variance estimate was not. Thus, in the control group, there was evidence of a pattern in which mothers' perception of coparenting decreased over time.

Next, we fit an identical curve model to the mothers in the experimental group—that is, women whose former husbands had participated in the DFL program. When we analyzed this model, we again observed good fit (e.g., nonsignificant chi-square and good RMSEA), a significant mean and variance for the initial status factor ( $M = 15, p < .05$ ;  $\sigma = 29.6, p < .05$ ), but the variance of the growth parameter did not significantly differ from zero. There was a significant mean for the growth factor, but it was positive ( $M = .10, p < .05$ ); thus, unlike the mothers in the control group, the mothers in the DFL group reported an *increase* in coparenting perceptions over time.

Third, as per the final recommended step of Curran and Muthen (1999), we assessed the effect of the DFL program on the growth patterns. Our results from this analysis are reported in the top rows of Table 2 and provide evidence for a good fit (e.g., nonsignificant chi-square and good RMSEA), significant mean ( $M = 15.15$ ) and variance ( $\sigma = 26.35$ ) of the intercept factor, a significant control group normative slope of  $-.06$  (which suggests a decline over time in mothers' perceived coparenting), but a positive and significant treatment slope of  $.15$ , which appears to significantly redirect



TABLE 2  
*Linear Latent Growth Curve Model Intercept, Slope, and Treatment Estimates for Mother and Father Perceptions of Coparenting*

	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i> <sup>2</sup>	RMSEA		Normative Intercept	Normative Slope	Treatment Slope
Mom	103/69	20.76	.04	Mean	15.15**	-.06*	.15**
				Variance	26.35**	.02	.01
Dad	87/61	21.79	.05	Mean	16.00**	-.02	.03
				Variance	29.31**	.03	.01

\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .001.

*Modified Latent Growth Curve Model Intercept, Slope, and Treatment Estimates for Mother and Father Perceptions of Interparent Conflict*

	<i>N</i>	<i>X</i> <sup>2</sup>	RMSEA		Normative Intercept	Normative Slope	Treatment Slope
Mom	101/66	26.56**	.10	Mean	19.36****	-.11****	-1.25****
				Variance	21.37****	.03	1.81
Dad	85/61	26.99**	.11	Mean	19.27****	-.06***	-1.83****
				Variance	16.20****	.04*	3.60

\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\*\**p* < .001.

change from a downward to an upward path. Figure 1 graphically represents the mean group-level change over time for mothers' perceptions of coparenting in the control and DFL groups for the normative intercept and slope factors, and the treatment group estimates from Table 2. Thus, DFL appears to precipitate mothers' coparenting perceptions to rise over time in the DFL condition, whereas in the control group, it is more probable that it will decline.

When we repeated the above set of analyses for fathers' reports of coparenting, we found slopes not significantly different from zero in either the experimental DFL group (.03) or in the control (-.02). The final step showed again their similarity in that we observed no difference in the growth trajectory in the two conditions. Thus, unlike the case for mothers, fathers' reports of coparenting were apparently not impacted by DFL, nor did they decay or increase over time. Finally, we repeated the third step analyses for both mothers and fathers using length of separation and time since

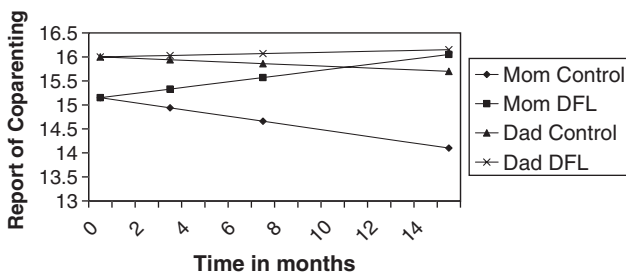


FIGURE 1. Graph of Mean-Level Change Over Time for Dads for Life and Control Groups of Mother's and Father's Perceptions of Coparenting After Divorce—Linear Growth Model

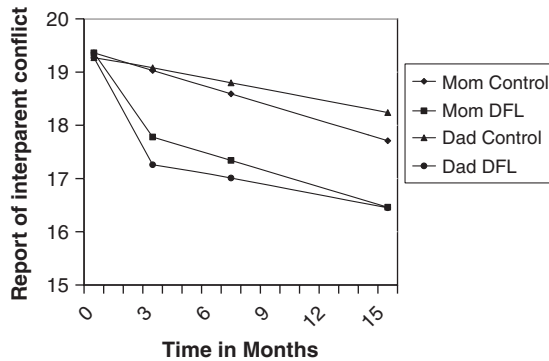


FIGURE 2. Graph of Mean-Level Change Over Time for Dads for Life and Control Groups of Mother's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Over Time—Nonlinear Growth Model

divorce as time-invariant covariates for the Waves 1–4 coparenting scores. The primary results were upheld when we conducted these analyses that served to control for demographic factors.

### Latent Growth Curve Modeling of DFL's Impact on Interparental Conflict

We again report separately the analyses for mothers and fathers, although for the interparental conflict variable, we found very similar effects for the two parents. Following the steps of the Curran and Muthen (1999) procedure, the interparental conflict scores did not appear to follow the linear pattern of growth observed for coparenting. Specifically, when we plotted the means of the control and DFL groups on the conflict score across the four waves, we observed a pattern in the DFL group in which conflict was highest at Wave 1, declined a good deal at Wave 2, and then remained at the immediate posttest level for Waves 3 and 4. Thus, when we attempted to estimate the Step 1 and 2 linear growth models, we observed poor fit. As a result, we tested for the treatment slope effect with altered weights that contrasted the pretest to all posttest waves (that is, 0, 1, 1, 1 rather than the 0, 3, 7, 15 for the coparenting variable). As reported in the bottom of Table 2, when we tested this adapted model, we obtained better fit estimates and a significant normative slope factor ( $M$  for normative slope for mothers and fathers, respectively =  $-.11$  and  $1.06$ ) that suggested that conflict normatively decreases linearly over time. Most important, on the third step, we found a significant additional reduction in conflict as a function of membership in the DFL group. This significant reduction was observed for both parents' reports of conflict ( $M$  for treatment factor =  $-1.25$  and  $-1.83$  for mothers and fathers, respectively). Figure 2 displays these trends graphically.

## DISCUSSION

A great deal of interest has been given recently to interventions for divorcing families that can reduce interparental conflict and promote coparenting. However, little success has been achieved and, heretofore, no success at all in a rigorous experimental trial. We explored here whether an intervention we developed and offered to noncustodial parents, Dads for Life—which was intended, and previously found, to promote children's well-being—could also improve the couple's interparental

relationship. This analysis, in the context of a rigorous experimental trial, produced strong evidence that indeed it can. We found that mothers' perceptions that they have an amicable postdissolution parenting relationship with the father tends naturally (or normatively) to decline over the 2 years after divorce, but that fathers' participation in DFL can statistically significantly reverse that trajectory so that it grows over time. Although the trend we observed in our data was modest in absolute terms (though significant), if it holds true over time, we might expect these differences in perceptions of coparenting to widen as the child ages, as parents remarry, and as time since the divorce increases. Moreover, we found that parents' report of interparental conflict tends normatively to decline a bit over time, much as has been found by other researchers (Ahrons, 1981; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). However, both fathers and mothers in families in which the father participated in DFL reported substantial and significant further reductions in conflict posttreatment.

One design feature that we employed makes the present findings particularly convincing and unique: We obtained reports about the relationship from both parents, even though only one participated in the intervention, and the other may not have even become aware (at least from us) that an intervention was undergone. When only the program participants report on the study's outcomes, several alternative explanations of any program effect found become highly plausible. For example, demand characteristics (the participants understand that the evaluators want to see change on the outcome, so they compliantly report it to them even though none is "truly" evident); dissonance effects ("I spent all this time and energy in the hopes that things would get better, so I will see and report them as better, whether or not they are 'real'"); and expectancy effects (the tendency to believe that the program will produce change makes it appear to the participant that it has) all become quite believable. These possibilities plague many program evaluations, including the only reported program effects on postdivorce conflict between parents reported previously in the literature (Kramer et al., 1998). The plausibility of these rival explanations becomes greatly reduced or eliminated when (one of) the reporter(s) of the outcome wasn't the participant himself or herself, and he or she may not even be aware that there was a program, such as in the present findings. It is even more impressive because the outcomes in question here, conflict and coparenting, are dyadic-level constructs. When only one partner of a couple participates in a program, that participant may indeed change his or her behavior, but the other partner may not respond well to the changes, resulting in homeostasis at the couple level (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998; Ersner-Hersfield & Kopel, 1979; Hurlbert, White, Powell, & Apt, 1993). However, in this case, the change in the one parent (the father) must have been substantial enough and comfortable enough that the entire dynamics of the relationship were revised in a way that was unmistakably apparent to the partner.

This relates to the one puzzling aspect of the findings. Although the mothers reported positive change in both coparenting and conflict over time, the program apparently only had a positive effect on the fathers' own perceptions of conflict, not also on their coparenting perceptions. Fathers in the control group did not show the same decline in coparenting over time that mothers did, and fathers in the experimental group, unlike the mothers, did not reverse this time trend. It is possible that, as study participants, the fathers had increased expectations about the reciprocal behavior expected from their ex-wives. These expectations may or may not have been met, and in those relationships in which it was not met, the father was disappointed.

To what specific components of DFL can the impressive effects be attributed? Is it the videos, the anger management techniques, the individual session, or the motivation to de-escalate conflict for the children's sake that we apparently harnessed? At this point, we can't unravel the effect and pinpoint the essential ingredients. (It could conceivably not even be the content of DFL at all, but rather simply the opportunity that DFL gave fathers to interact with other divorced fathers. Recall that our control group was a home study condition, which might constitute a limitation of our current data; Kalichman et al., 1999.) We hope that additional later analyses or further refined trials will reveal what is necessary and what is not. Can just the two conflict sessions be used standalone? Can even these be shortened or administered individually or in a single session? The question is important because developers may well want to create condensed programs that don't require the full DFL sessions and content.

Questions about the target population remain as well. Will the content work as well for mothers? Will it work for couples who are especially selected for high levels of postdivorce conflict? Of course, these are empirical questions that await later research, but we suspect that the answer is No. As mentioned above, the content was specially designed for males, based on substantial empirical work on gender differences in how couples manifest conflict. High-conflict couples, we think, represent unique problems best approached in other venues, such as parenting coordinators (Baris et al., 2001; Sullivan, 2004; Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004). And we found that the conflict and relationship content, although apparently effective, were not sought or welcomed by the fathers, who commonly were not initially comfortable ceasing hostilities unilaterally. We doubt that we would have enjoyed our high recruitment rate of 47% if we had recruited based on the controversial parent-parent material; they attended instead because of the appeal of the parent-child content. Thus, we deliberately delayed presentation of this more delicate conflict content until rapport had been achieved with the less threatening material.

The substantial self-selection our sample experienced poses another limitation. It is likely that those who enrolled in and completed the program were highly motivated to continue an active role in their children's lives, as compared with those who dropped out. Although we took care that this selection bias did not threaten the internal validity of the evaluation, questions remain to be answered about its external validity. This may be a concern for those who might want to adopt the program.

## CONCLUSION

Family courts have increasingly come to adopt programs to assist parents and children with the transition to divorce (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999; Geelhoed, Blaisure, & Geasler, 2001), and many courts have reported plans to adopt proven prevention programs in their service delivery system (Cookston, Braver, Sandler, & Genalo, 2002). After a thorough review of the empirical research literature, Grych (2005) concluded that prevention programs designed to improve parent-parent relationships after divorce should be a part of the menu to protect children from the negative effects associated with divorce. Integrating proven programs for divorcing families into family courts is the next challenge facing preventionists (Braver, Hipke, Ellman, & Sandler, 2004). Our results suggest that Dads for Life presented to volunteering

fathers offers substantial promise to courts hoping to alter the trajectories of divorcing families.

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