

Postseparation parenting education in a Family Relationship Centre: A pilot study exploring the impact on perceived parent–child relationship and acrimony

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated whether 31 parents who attended the Sydney City Family Relationship Centre experienced improvement in parent–child relationship and a decrease in parental acrimony following a brief postseparation parenting education program. It was hypothesized that the results would indicate an improvement in parents' perceived parent–child relationship six to ten weeks after the postseparation parenting education program and this was found to be the case. It was also hypothesized that parents would experience a decrease in parental acrimony six to ten weeks after the postseparation parenting education program. However the results did not support this hypothesis. The results indicated an inverse relationship between the constructs of interest; as acrimony decreased, parent–child relationship improved. Findings from this pilot study endorse the continuation of a brief postseparation parenting education component in the FRC model. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: postseparation parenting education; Family Relationship Centres; parent–child relationship; acrimony; reflective functioning

Family separation represents a significant life stressor for both parents and children, involving multifaceted psychological experiences and the potential for aversive effects on the mental

and physical wellbeing of those involved (McIntosh, Burke, Dour, & Gridley, 2009). Often there are complex legal processes involved when matters relating to the separation are in dispute,

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which may include parenting arrangements, financial issues, asset allocation, and ongoing child support. Over the last decade, an agenda has been steadily emerging for postseparation family dispute resolution (FDR) to incorporate processes that embrace both the psychological and legal aspects associated with family separation (McIntosh, 2006).

The Australian FDR framework for separated families has undergone substantial transitions in recent years, most fundamentally through the introduction of the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth). This legislation encompasses a series of provisions focusing attention on parental attitudes and competence (Family Court of Australia, 2009a; Kaspiew, 2007) and is underpinned by consideration of children's best interests in light of their parents' parental management capacities. Under the new provisions the Court must consider the ability and willingness of each parent to encourage and facilitate a close and continuing relationship between the child and the other parent (Kaspiew, 2007; Overington, 2009). The court is also required to consider the extent to which each parent has historically taken the opportunity to exercise parental responsibility, fulfil their obligation to support and physically maintain the child, and communicate with the child (Kaspiew, 2007). In addition, the Family Court has always had the capacity to refer parents for education, counselling, and conferences with the Court's family consultants, and the new provisions extend the option of one-off or multiple referrals to compulsory mediation and postseparation education (Family Court of Australia, 2009b).

In conjunction with these recent legislative changes, the establishment of community-based Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) was designed to assist families generally, though its main focus is on families in the process of separating (Moloney, 2006). The number of child-focused dispute resolution services increased significantly with the roll out of 65 Centres between 2006 and 2008 (Fletcher, 2008). From

July 2007, FDR became a mandatory first step for most parents who were unable to agree on parenting arrangements after separation (Kaspiew, Gray, Weston, Moloney, Hand, Qu, & the family law evaluation team, 2009). Within the FRCs, FDR is supported by parenting education about family relationships and the impact of entrenched conflict and parental acrimony on children (Moloney, 2006). Key services within FRCs, combined with an emphasis on facilitated referrals to other relevant services, aim to equip parents with the knowledge and skills needed to shield children throughout the process of their family's separation, to highlight the importance of fostering and protecting positive parent-child relationships, and to minimise parental acrimony (Australian Government, 2007).

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF SEPARATION

The context of this expansion of community-based services is the growing understanding of the impact of family separation on children and adolescents over the last five decades (Kelly, 2003). It has been consistently shown that the adjustment of children to their parents' separation or divorce is strongly related to the psychological adjustment of parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) and the quality of parental functioning postseparation (Amato, 2000). Separated parents are likely to become overwhelmed and preoccupied with their own emotional responses following separation and the adjustment to single parenting (Kelly, 2003). Parental mindfulness for children's needs and experiences may in turn be limited (McIntosh & Long, 2006), meaning that children encounter less effective parenting at precisely the same time as they need stability and parental support in their quickly changing life. This is particularly the case if a parent's mental health is simultaneously challenged, especially if as a result, the parent is relying inappropriately on the child for emotional support (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Resilience, defined as the capacity to endure difficulties and challenges without developing clinically significant adjustment problems, has been found to be a mediating factor in the development of children's postseparation adjustment difficulties (Kelly, 2000). Emery (2006) suggested the resilience of children from divorced families is linked to a parent's genuine and accurate understanding of the child's perspectives and the parent's ability to honestly act in the child's best interests. From this perspective, resilience is less an independent property of the child, and more a product of the interaction of protective factors with sources of risk (McIntosh, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

In Australia approximately 1 in 12 children in the general population will present with a mental health problem at some time; however, among the divorcing population this ratio increases to 1 in 4 children (McIntosh, 2003). Research has indicated higher levels of maladjustment in this group of children in the areas of child-related obedience and self-regulation (Wadsworth, Burnell, Taylor, & Butler, 1985), close relationships with family members and authority figures (Amato, 2001), earlier commencement of sexual activity (McLanahan, 1999), substance abuse (Neher & Short, 1998), slightly increased incidence of anxiety (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), internalisation of emotion together with depressed mood and self-esteem issues (Amato, 2001), and decline in educational attainment (Evans, Kelley, & Wanner, 2001; McLanahan, 1999). An Australian longitudinal study involving disputing parents attending the Family Court found that at the time of intake for the study, one third of children among the participating population were in the clinical range of psychological symptoms based on parent report (McIntosh & Long, 2006).

The best available evidence also suggests that about 15 months after separation, just under a fifth of Australian parents report the continuation of highly conflicted or fearful relationships, while about a fifth report their relationship to be distant (Kaspiew, et al., 2009). Maccoby, Buchanan,

Mnookin, & Dornbusch (1993), have shown that the adjustment of children postseparation depends significantly on the amount of conflict present during the separation and divorce and the quality of the co-parenting relationship that follows. Kelly (2000) pointed out that the conflict threshold at which risk occurs in each family remains unclear; however, it is clear that when parents are entrenched in ongoing conflict with one another and engaged in enduring acrimonious relations, parenting capacity and emotional availability are both likely to be limited (McIntosh & Long, 2006).

Acrimony has been increasingly recognised as a major risk factor associated with children's adjustment to divorce (McIntosh et al., 2009). It is marked by high levels of distrust and anger, intermittent physical aggression and verbal abuse, low levels of cooperation about children's care, poorer role modelling through ongoing communication difficulties, inconsistent discipline, sabotaging of the children's relationship with the other parent (Emery, 1982a; McIntosh, 2003), and ultimately impoverished parent-child bonding and child-parent attachment (McIntosh, 2003). Importantly however, even in situations of high acrimony, it is possible for amelioration of these conflicts to occur (Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2007).

PARENTING EDUCATION AND PARENTAL REFLECTIVE FUNCTIONING

McIntosh (2006) has found that when parents become preoccupied with their separation the capacity for reflective, higher order thought about interpersonal dynamics is eroded. This capacity, termed reflective functioning, is defined as the ability to envision mental states in one's self and others by understanding thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviours in terms of underlying intentions and mental states (Slade, 2005; 2008). Reflective functioning recognises that one's own mind and others' minds are separate and autonomous.

A parent who has (or regains) the capacity for reflective functioning is likely to respond to their child's emotional reactions and needs with accept-

ance and openness, which in turn fosters in the child a sense that both positive and negative emotions are tolerable (Rosenblum, McDonough, Sameroff, & Muzik, 2008). In addition, parents' capacity to make sense of their own mental states and those of their children assists in the development of flexible and adaptive means of self-regulation and the establishment of healthy interpersonal relationships (Slade, 2006; Slade, Grienberger, Bernbach, Levy, & Locker, 2005).

Reflective functioning buffers the child against potentially toxic postseparation conflict by providing an emotional scaffold around life transitions and emotional experiences (Katz & Gottman, 1997; McIntosh & Long, 2006). Slade (2006) suggested that the primary purpose of any parenting program designed to strengthen parental reflective functioning must be to engage parents in thinking about their child's internal experience rather than their behaviour. In turn, education programs designed to develop parents' reflective functioning capacities tap into and build upon this protective facet of the parent-child relationship and aim to decrease parental acrimony through improved insight regarding the child's experience of interparental conflict.

Until recently postseparation parenting education was considered to be in relative infancy (McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003), and to date there has been minimal published research in this country evaluating education programs for separated parents (APS, 2007). As child-focused programs have emerged within the family law system (Webb & Moloney, 2003), postseparation parenting programs have been increasingly viewed as core interventions. Even brief education programs are widely considered to be an excellent starting point for embarking on a FDR process (McIntosh et al., 2009).

THE CURRENT STUDY

To date, limited research has been conducted involving FRC populations and processes (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2009). A pilot study was undertaken to explore whether, while

engaged with a FRC, parents experience change in the identified constructs of interest, namely, parent-child relationship (PCR) and parental acrimony (PAC). Specifically investigated was the change in PCR and PAC following attendance at the "Kids in Focus" postseparation parenting education program, which is a compulsory component of the FRC process at the Sydney City Family Relationship Centre (SCFRC). In essence, the research sought to assess the usefulness of a brief postseparation parenting education program.

The SCFRC is run by Relationships Australia (RA) NSW and offers FDR to parents in regard to forming agreements about postseparation arrangements for children. The "Kids in Focus" program is a single-session, 2.5 hour, child-focused postseparation parenting education program developed by RA NSW. It is underpinned by the booklet *Because it's for the kids: Building a secure parenting base after separation* (McIntosh, 2005), which is widely utilised as a practical and theoretical reference at FRCs and distributed in education programs for separated parents.

A quantitative methodology was employed to identify whether participants experienced change in perceived PCR and PAC pre and post attendance at the postseparation parenting education program. It was hypothesized that there would be an improvement in perceived PCR (*Hypothesis One*) and a decrease in PAC (*Hypothesis Two*) following the child-focused postseparation parenting education program. It was also hypothesized that there would be a relationship between change in PCR and change in PAC pre and post attendance at the "Kids in Focus" program (*Hypothesis Three*).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 31 parents (17 mothers, 14 fathers) who had separated or divorced from their child(ren)'s other parent and were attending the Sydney City Family Relationship Centre (SCFRC). Thirteen mothers were primary carers. One mother was the non-residential parent who

spent regular overnight time with her child(ren). No fathers were resident parents and seven spent regular time with their child(ren). Five participants were in shared care arrangements (of these, one father had an equal time arrangement in place, with the other three fathers and one mother spending between 35–65% of time with their child[ren]). One mother and four fathers had no contact with their child(ren).

All participants were parents who had first made contact with the SCFRC (called Parent 1). The study did not include those parents (Parent 2) who were subsequently invited into the process after Parent 1 had had their first appointments. Given that this study involved a sample engaged in a “Kids in Focus” program that was a required precursor to mandatory FDR, no control group was able to be established. That is, there are no parents in dispute about their children who do not go through this sequence at the SCFRC. In addition, data were not collected on the length of time since separation or the circumstances surrounding the separation.

Measures

Parent–child relationship

The Parent–Child Relationship (PCR) Scale (McIntosh & Long, 2003) provides a measure of the parent’s perceived relationship with their child. The PCR Scale (McIntosh & Long, 2003) is a 7-item self-report measure that was developed to determine the degree of closeness in the relationship between parents and their children, and responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has been found to have high overall reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.80$) (McIntosh, Wells, Smyth & Long, 2008) and has been utilised in other research specifically involving postseparation populations (McIntosh & Long, 2003, 2006; McIntosh et al., 2008).

Parental acrimony

The Acrimony (PAC) Scale measures the level of acrimony or psychological conflict between separated parents (McIntosh & Long, 2006). Devel-

oped by Emery (1982b), the 25-item, 4-point Likert scale (*almost never* to *almost always*), is focused on areas of potential conflict between separated parents, including visitation, custody, and support (Shaw & Emery, 1987). Items are worded to control for response bias, and reverse scoring is required on 11 items (Touliatos, Perlmutter, & Straus, 2001). The questionnaire yields one scale labeled Acrimony, comprising all 25 items. The PAC Scale has been found to have high internal consistency (.86) and test-retest reliability ($\alpha=.88$) (Emery, 1982b) and has also been widely utilised in other research specifically involving postseparation populations (Emery, 2006; McIntosh & Long, 2006; McIntosh et al., 2008, Shaw & Emery, 1987).

Procedures

Ethics

Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted by the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee on 7 May 2009, and by the RA NSW Ethics Committee on 5 May 2009.

Family Relationship Centre process

As part of the FDR process employed at the SCFRC, parents initially attend a one-on-one interview with a Family Advisor. If the case is deemed appropriate for FDR based on criteria outlined in the FRC Operational Framework (Australian Government, 2007), the client is booked to attend the 2.5 hour “Kids in Focus” group seminar, with attendees numbering between 6 and 12 parents (both mothers and fathers). Following attendance at “Kids in Focus”, each parent is contacted by a Family Mediator (also known as a FDR Practitioner or FDRP), and an individual meeting is arranged between each parent and the FDRP. After both parents have had individual meetings with a FDRP, a joint mediation session involving both parents may then be scheduled. On average, the duration of the process from Parent 1 contacting the SCFRC to a mediation taking place is between 3

and 6 months (J. Carmichael, personal communication, 25 September, 2009). The FRC process is visually described in Figure 1.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from among parents booked to attend one of the 14 “Kids in Focus” programs held at the SCFRC between 16 May and 30 July 2009. Parents were only invited to participate in the study if they satisfied the following criteria: (a) they were Parent 1 and had met with a Family Advisor who had made a preliminary assessment that the matter would be suitable for FDR; (b) they completed the SCFRC registration form and ticked a box on the form consenting to be contacted by the SCFRC for research or evaluation purposes; (c) they had no untreated severe mental health concerns as previously diagnosed and disclosed to the Family Advisor, which would have prevented them from gaining benefit out of the program, and they were not identified by the Family Advisor as having potential for such diagnosis; and (d) they were not a client of the first author in her capacity as a Family Advisor at the SCFRC. Interested parties received information required for participation through the mail. Of the 39 parents deemed suitable to participate in the research, 31 parents agreed to participate (response rate 79.5%).

Administration of questionnaires

Participants were asked to arrive at the SCFRC 20 to 30 minutes early on the date scheduled for their “Kids in Focus” session to participate in the study. On arrival parents privately completed the consent form, the PCR Scale (McIntosh, 2003) and the PAC Scale (Emery, 1982b). Following completion of the questionnaires and a short debrief with the researcher, the participants attended “Kids in Focus” immediately thereafter. A researcher-devised case identification method was applied to completed questionnaires with codes and identifications being secured separately at the SCFRC. Of the original 31 participants, 27 completed the post intervention questionnaires (69.2% response rate from 39 parents suitable for participation). Questionnaires were sent out and returned by post and email, with the request for participants to respect a set timeframe for questionnaire returns. Posttests were taken no less than 6 weeks after completion of the parenting education program in order for the program content to have been applied in a practical parenting context (Jennifer E. McIntosh, personal communication, 10 March 2009).

General statistical approach

Data at Time 1 and Time 2 were parametrically analysed using PASW for Windows, Version 17.0 (SPSS Inc., 2009) to compare pretest and posttest means on PCR Scale responses and PAC Scale

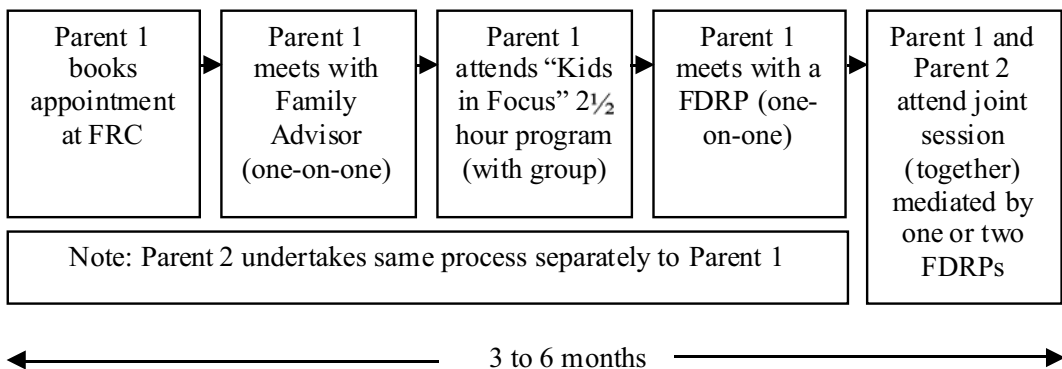


FIGURE 1: FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRE PROCESS: PATHWAY OF PARENT 1

responses. These tests were employed to investigate Hypothesis One and Hypothesis Two. A bivariate correlation analysis of the residual gain scores for each measure was then undertaken to investigate Hypothesis Three. Finally, changes in means by gender and care pattern from Time 1 to Time 2 on both the PCR Scale responses and PAC Scale responses were calculated and explored.

RESULTS

Parent-child relationship (PCR)

The mean total PCR score from Time 1 to Time 2 for the total study population ($N=27$) was relatively stable (M Time 2 – M Time 1 = $-.02$). Cronbach's Alpha for PCR at Time 1 ($\alpha=.76$) and PCR at Time 2 ($\alpha=.87$) indicated strong internal reliability for the Parent-Child Relationship Scale (see Table 1).

The Shapiro-Wilk test of normality indicated that the data were normally distributed for PCR at Time 1 ($W=.94$, $p=.11$), but not normally distributed for PCR at Time 2 ($W=.82$, $p=.00$). Therefore, an inspection of the data was undertaken to explore the data distribution, revealing four substantial outliers (three outliers where the difference in PCR between Time 1 and Time 2 was greater than $-.75$ and one outlier where this difference was greater than $.75$). These outliers were removed from the data, following which the mean total PCR score increased from Time 1 to Time 2 (M Time2 – M Time1 = $.12$), and the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality indicated that the data were normally distributed for PCR at Time 1 ($W=.95$, $p=.32$) and PCR at Time 2 ($W=.94$, $p=.14$). At this point, the sample size was 23 (see Table 2).

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>SEM</i>
PCR Time 1	27	4.38 (.447)	.086
PCR Time 2	27	4.36 (.606)	.116

TABLE 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP, OUTLIERS REMOVED

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>SEM</i>
PCR Time 1	23	4.44 (.355)	.074
PCR Time 2	23	4.53 (.363)	.076

A paired-samples t test was undertaken with the revised sample to test H1. It was found that there was a statistically significant improvement in parent-child relationship from Time 1 ($M=4.44$, $SD=.35$) to Time 2 ($M=4.53$, $SD=.36$), ($t(22)=-2.14$, $p=.044$). These results suggest that parent-child relationship improved during the period from pre to post attendance at the postseparation parenting education program.

Parental acrimony (PAC)

The mean PAC score from Time 1 to Time 2 for the total study population ($N=27$) was relatively stable (M Time2 – M Time1 = $.04$). Cronbach's alpha for PAC at Time 1 ($\alpha=.92$) and PAC at time 2 ($\alpha=.92$) indicated strong internal reliability for the Acrimony Scale (see Table 3).

The Shapiro-Wilk test of normality indicated that the data were normally distributed for PAC at Time 1 ($W=.94$, $p=.68$), and for PAC at Time 2 ($W=.96$, $p=.40$). Following a paired samples t test, it was found that there was no statistically significant decrease in acrimony from Time 1 ($M=2.12$, $SD=.49$) to Time 2 ($M=2.16$, $SD=.10$), ($t(26)=-.73$, $p=.47$). These results suggest that there was no decrease in acrimony during the period from pre to post attendance at the postseparation parenting education program. Further inspection of the data

TABLE 3: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS: PARENTAL ACRIMONY

	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>SEM</i>
PAC Time 1	27	2.12 (.492)	.095
PAC Time 2	27	2.16 (.539)	.104

revealed no outliers in the difference in acrimony between Time 1 and Time 2.

Relationship between change in parent–child relationship and change in parental acrimony

In order to establish whether a relationship existed between change in PCR and change in PAC pre and post the intervention, residual gain scores for PCR at Time 1 and Time 2 and residual gain scores for PAC at Time 1 and Time 2 were generated. A two-tailed bivariate correlation analysis was then undertaken using the unstandardised PCR residual gain scores and unstandardised PAC residual gain scores, to investigate whether there was a relationship between the change in parent–child relationship from Time 1 to Time 2 and the change in acrimony from Time 1 to Time 2. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated and it was found that there was an inverse correlation between the change in PCR and ACR ($r=-.53$, $N=27$, $p=.005$), indicating that as acrimony decreased there was evident improvement in parent–child relationship. Given that outliers had previously been identified in the data, to further test this hypothesis the outliers were once again removed and a two-tailed bivariate correlation analysis was undertaken using the unstandardised PCR resid-

ual gain scores and unstandardised PAC residual gain scores. Following the removal of outliers, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient indicated there was an inverse correlation between the change in PCR and ACR ($r=-.42$, $N=23$, $p=.044$). Again these results suggest that as acrimony decreased there was evident improvement in parent–child relationship.

Changes by gender and care pattern

As shown in Table 4, mothers’ mean PCR score increased from Time 1 to Time 2 whereas fathers’ mean PCR score decreased; however, neither change was statistically significant. Outliers influenced the mean change for fathers. By care pattern, primary carers were the only group that experienced a statistically significant change in PCR from Time 1 to Time 2. There was no significant difference in PCR change scores by type of overnight care pattern (i.e., shared care or primary overnight arrangements). There were two substantial directionally-opposed outliers among the small group of nonresident parents who spent time with their children, indicating a wide range of responses for parents in this group. There was no significant change in mother or father acrimony scores by gender between Time 1 and Time 2, nor were there any significant changes by overnight care pattern (see Table 5).

TABLE 4: CHANGE IN PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIP BY GENDER AND CARE PATTERN

	Time		N	t	df
	PCR Time 1	PCR Time 2			
Mothers	4.42 (.384)	4.51 (.353)	15	-.84	14
Fathers	4.35 (.533)	4.17 (.799)	12	.42	11
Primary carers (4–7 nts/week)	4.47 (.352)	4.61 (.259)	12	2.4*	11
Visitation parent (1–3 nts/week)	4.59 (.313)	4.49 (.487)	7	-.47	6
Shared care	4.39 (.376)	4.42 (.350)	4	.79	3
No contact	3.75 (.527)	3.35 (.822)	4	-.79	3

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means. $p<.05$.

TABLE 5: CHANGE IN PARENTAL ACRIMONY BY GENDER AND CARE PATTERN

	Time		N	t	df
	PAC Time 1	PAC Time 2			
Mothers	2.16 (.487)	2.15 (.472)	15	-.12	14
Fathers	2.07 (.516)	2.17 (.635)	12	1.08	11
Primary carers (4–7 nts/week)	2.03 (.373)	2.05 (.416)	12	.31	11
Visitation parent (1–3 nts/week)	1.85 (.518)	2.00 (.508)	7	1.80	6
Shared care	2.29 (.474)	2.05 (.340)	4	-2.09	3
No contact	2.72 (.306)	2.90 (.631)	4	.81	3

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.
 $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Summary of findings

This pilot study sought to explore changes in parent–child relationship and parental acrimony following a brief postseparation parenting education program among a population of separated parents attending a Family Relationship Centre. This investigation was motivated by theoretical and empirical literature indicating that the potential for adverse outcomes for children who experience family separation can be minimised if parents can also minimise their levels of parental acrimony (Emery, 2006; Shaw & Emery, 1987) and maintain a strong parent–child relationship (McIntosh & Long, 2006; McIntosh et al., 2009). Underpinning these principles is the notion that education programs focusing on postseparation parenting (McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003) and parental reflective functioning (Slade, 2006) contribute to better outcomes for children in separated families, via these identified constructs.

In support of Hypothesis One, there was found to be a moderate, statistically significant improvement in perceived parent–child relationship during the period from pre to post attendance at the postseparation parenting education intervention. This finding aligns with previous research (Gillard

& Seymour, 2005; McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003). The impact of a postseparation parenting education program within a Family Relationship Centre has not previously been investigated and, although the sample size was small, the results offer support for the potential contribution of an education component to enhancing outcomes for parents engaged in FDR and their children.

On review of the changes in parent–child relationship by care pattern, it is interesting to note that there was a statistically significant improvement in perceived parent–child relationship only for primary carers. Given that primary carers would be expected to spend considerably more time with their child than parents in other arrangements, it is likely that they would therefore show a greater awareness of improvements in the relationship with their child following the intervention. It is possible that nonprimary carers did not have enough contact with their child across the duration of this study to observe improvements in their relationship with their child. While the sample size for this subgroup of the broader participant sample was small, the participants represented parents who were in the midst of family separation and were a random sample. Hence, the experiences of these parents are likely to be indicative of other parents in similar situations.

In terms of parent–child relationship, it would seem that even a brief program for parents engaged in FDR is able to build on the value of continuing contact between parent and child. That is, the parents of this study appeared to be open to noticing and effecting opportunities for improvements in their relationship with their child with whom they continue to have contact. This finding supports the value of a program that emphasises the importance of parent–child relationship strategies and values, as well as the importance for the parent to continue regular and close contact with his or her child.

In relation to Hypothesis Two, the results showed there was no difference in parental acrimony following the postseparation parenting education program. The mean level of acrimony reported by the participant sample remained stable before and after the implementation of the program. Given the mean PAC score pre and post was in the range of 2.0 to 2.5, the Acrimony Scale norms indicate that these parents and their children would have benefited from a decrease in parental acrimony (Emery, 1982b).

It is worth noting that parents' pre and post intervention responses were taken over a relatively brief period of time (i.e., 6 to 10 weeks). Thus, it might be realistically questioned whether acrimony, built up over time, would noticeably reduce in a brief period. In a previous study, McIntosh and Long (2006) found no significant change in acrimony 12 weeks after FDR for parents who had been engaged in a child-focused intervention. Hence, while some parents were able to recognise improvements in the relationship between themselves and their children, it is possible that they were unable to recognise the importance of striving for improvement in the relationship between themselves as parents and individuals.

It is important to note the difference between the separate findings for the *positive increase* in parent–child relationship and *no change* in acrimony, and the findings for *an interaction between* parent–child relationship and acrimony. That is,

while parents overall reported an improvement in parent–child relationship, they did not appear to experience a reduction in acrimony at the end of the program. Yet the findings for Hypothesis Three, which specifically investigated the interaction of parent–child relationship and acrimony, supported an inverse relationship between the two constructs, resulting in Hypothesis Three being accepted.

The literature clearly indicates a relationship between parent–child relationship and parental acrimony in terms of outcomes for children (Emery, 2006; Kelly & Emery, 2003; McIntosh, 2005). However, there appears to be limited empirical research exploring the nature of the relationship between both constructs. The seeming contradiction in findings for Hypotheses Two and Three suggests the presence of factors other than the intervention influencing the interaction of these constructs. Although it is likely that this interaction is quite complex, being able to identify the influence of factors on the interaction between parent–child relationship and parental acrimony would be a valuable contribution to the development of specific program content in post-separation parenting education programs. An increase in participant sample size and research specifically targeting the effect of other variables might clarify this issue.

Possible implications

From these research findings, it is feasible to suggest that during the course of engagement with a FRC parents do gain greater awareness of ways to improve their postseparation parenting. Parents who engage positively with FRC staff may experience less isolation and perhaps a sense of relief at having had their situation normalised and affirmed. For some, this may lead to a reduction in prior anxiety about parenting arrangements and to a more positive outlook for their parenting future. Following engagement with a FRC, a parent's contact with their child's other parent may increase or decrease. The hope however is that any such changes will be motivated by what is best for

their child, with resulting positive effect on the parenting alliance and parent–child relationship.

This study represents the first empirical research to be conducted in a FRC environment regarding parent–child relationship and parental acrimony. In this way, it contributes to the growing body of research on postseparation parenting in general and, specifically, in relation to parents in conflict. This research also contributes to evaluation and exploration of the foundation principles of the FRC model: assisting conflicting parents and improving outcomes for children in separated families.

Limitations of the present research

As this study was exploratory in nature and participants were recruited from a clinical population engaged in a compulsory FDR process of 3 to 6 months duration, it was not possible to incorporate a control group in the research design. In addition, the sample size for this study was small ($N=27$), influenced primarily by time constraints in recruitment of participants due to the repeated measures design. It is probable that there was also a sampling bias in regard to the study, as only those classified as Parent 1 (i.e., those parents who made the first approach to the FRC) were recruited. It is possible, perhaps likely, that the experiences of these parents are different along a number of dimensions to those categorised as Parent 2. However, as no Parent 2 was involved in this research, it is not possible to make conclusions about these potential differences. As well, the existence of social desirability factors for parents attending the SCFRC must be considered. All material provided to participants in this study reiterated the independence of the research from each parent's engagement with the SCFRC. However, it would be reasonable to assume that some level of social desirability was unavoidable given the in-house nature of the postseparation parenting program. In turn, this may have influenced participant responses on the PCR and PAC scales.

Future directions

As this study is the first of its kind undertaken in a FRC environment, there would be substantial benefit in expanding the research beyond the current study. A larger sample size would allow for greater statistical power in analysing changes in the constructs of interest. It would be interesting to explore with parents the factors other than the postseparation parenting education program that they consider to influence their parent–child relationship and parental acrimony, particularly in relation to the interaction of these constructs. Future research might also explore the difference between conflict as a behaviour and acrimony as a psychologically held hostility (J.E. McIntosh, personal communication, August, 2010). The use of a waitlist control group would assist in identifying the influence of other factors on both parent–child relationship and acrimony, and whether change occurs with the passage of time regardless of the intervention. In relation to the postseparation parenting education program itself, it could also be worthwhile to undertake global comparisons across FRCs to explore any differences and potential facilitator effects. Finally, there would be benefit in undertaking a similarly designed study involving Parent 1 and Parent 2 concurrently, to investigate their individual experiences of change in parent–child relationship, parental acrimony, and parental reflective functioning. A study of this nature would also allow an analysis of the interaction between each parent's individual degrees of change in the constructs of interest.

IN CONCLUSION

The results of this exploratory research offer empirical support for the efforts of FRCs in enhancing positive outcomes for children experiencing family separation through improving parent–child relationships. In this case, involvement in a brief postseparation parenting education program corresponded with improvement in parent–child relationship, while parents were

engaged with a FRC. This pilot study provides support for continuation of a postseparation parenting education component in the FRC model and offers a foundation for further research with separated parents engaged in FDR.

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