

Divorcing Parent Education Programs: An Evaluation Using a Quasi-Random Regression Discontinuity Design

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What is Divorcing Parent Education?

- Very fast-growing movement offering court-connected programs to inform parents seeking divorce about issues they will face
- Typically 2-8 hours long; modal is 4 hours
- Husbands and wives attend, but separately
- Most common part of curriculum is conflict avoidance for sake of child
- Urges settling rather than litigating, and advocates a strong post-divorce role for both parents

Current Prevalence

- Now offered in about half of all US counties
- From 0 in 1985
- Either mandated for all; mandated for some; or “encouraged”; or voluntary
- Mandated by 6 states for all

Despite popularity, little research

- Research shows well-received by parents
- Many calls for rigorous evaluations
 - Should it be funded?
 - Should it be mandated?
 - Who should come?
 - How can it be improved?
- Is it accomplishing goals?
- What are goals?
- Better long-term and short-term outcomes for divorcing families, especially children
- “Outcomes” mentioned by some:
 - More amicable settlements: less litigation
 - Settlement provisions thoughtful and fair to all parties
 - Faster settlement
 - Less post-decree litigation
 - Less parental fighting and arguing
 - Better adjusted parents
 - Withdrawn dissolution petitions and marital reconciliation
 - Better parenting and co-parenting
 - Better adjusted children

Findings on Outcomes

- Some positive, almost no negative findings
- But raises question of “compared to what”
- Research Design issues

Evaluation Research Design Primer (Campbell & Stanley, 1963)

- Pre-Experimental (generally worthless)
- Experimental (the best: think FDA drug studies)
- Quasi-Experimental (can be almost as good, if conducted with care)
- Promising Practices Network: “quality evidence-based information about *what works* to improve the lives of children, youth, and families”
 - “PROVEN”: Study design uses a convincing comparison group to identify program impacts, including randomized-control trial (experimental design) or some quasi-experimental designs.
 - “PROMISING”: Study has a comparison group, but it may exhibit some weaknesses, e.g., the groups lack comparability on pre-existing variables or the analysis does not employ appropriate statistical controls.

Two Pre-Experimental Designs

- One Group Post-Test Only
 - “Did you like it?” (Consumer satisfaction)
 - Find that they did, or said conflict was bad
 - Compared to what?
- One Group Pre- and Post-Test
 - Scores on Outcomes at Post-Test Compared to those at Pre-Test
 - Several studies show effects with this design, e.g. on conflict
 - How can you be sure it’s the program, not just the passage of time, just re-asking questions, etc.
 - No drug studies this way

Experimental Designs:

Using random assignment to a control group

- Pre- and Post-test of an experimental vs a control group, randomly created

R { Experimental
Control

Pre-Test	Tx	Post-Test
O1	X	O2
O3		O4

Gold Standard Experimental Designs Require Assignment at Random to Experimental vs Control Group

- Not easy to do in Court setting?
- In any event, virtually none have been conducted

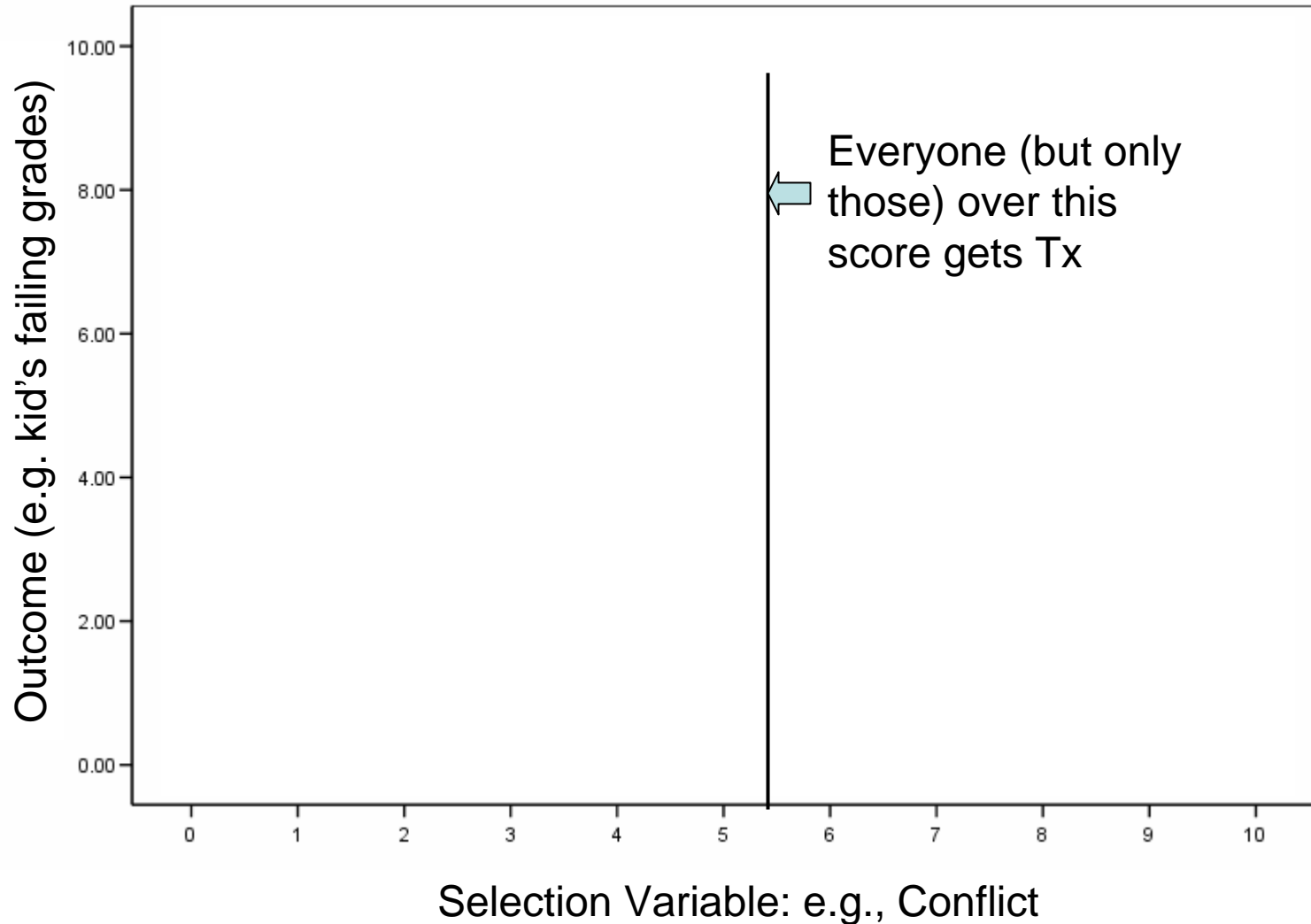
Two Quasi-Experimental Designs: CAN be “Almost as good”

- 1. Non-Equivalent Control Group Design

	Pre-Test	Tx	Post-Test
N_R { Experimental Comparison Grp	O1	X	O2
	O3		O4

- Another county
- A year earlier
- Couples who CHOOSE not to attend
- The two Groups might not be equivalent
 - on Pre-Test
 - even worse, on other respects not measured that affect proclivity to change
 - Complex statistical adjustments (propensity scores) have been shown to correct for pre-existing differences
 - but none have been conducted in this context

2. Regression Discontinuity



Has been shown to produce results as accurate as Randomized Designs

Our Study

- Regression Discontinuity Using Petition Date as Selection Variable
- Fortuitous, in that, as a pilot test, the Presiding Judge of Maricopa County wanted to see how Divorcing Parent Education worked here, partnered with ASU Psych
- Based program on model program in Cobb County, GA
- Every couple petitioning for divorce in a certain 6 week period in one jurisdiction was ordered to attend (N=191)
- As control periods, the 6 6-week periods before that one, and the 6 6-week periods after were selected
- We randomly selected 20 divorces in this same jurisdiction within each of these 12 control periods
- So we have both “onset” and “offset”
- If there is an effect, when plotted against period or interval, there should be a “blip” at the 7th

Outcomes Measured

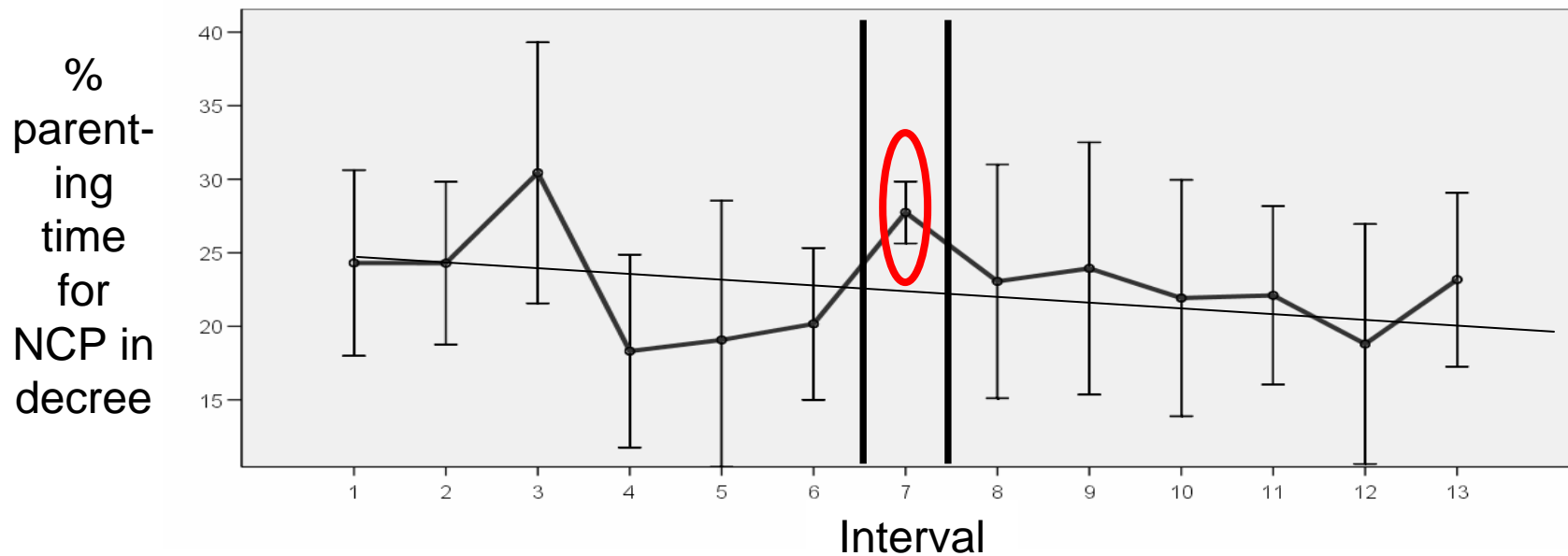
- Restricted to outcomes available from a study of the divorce file

Intent-To-Treat (ITT) Analysis:

- Analyze all couples in experimental period, whether the parents actually attended or not
- Rules out selection effects, preserves internal validity, but underestimates effects
- No effects on:
 - Withdrawn petitions
 - Time to divorce final
 - Number of actions
 - Relitigation
 - Child Support ordered
 - Residential or Legal Custody

Main Significant Finding

- Parenting time provisions of decrees in experimental period were significantly more generous to non-custodial parent than those in the control periods



- Very few (<1%) were adjudicated (in all intervals); these are virtually exclusively agreements between the parties

But what about actual attendance?

Because it was new, unfamiliar to attorneys, and unenforced, not everyone ordered attended

		Mom's Attendance		
		Yes	No	
Dad's Attendance	Yes	55%	12%	67%
	No	14%	19%	33%
		69%	31%	

Whose actual participation mattered (more)?

- Moms'? (possibly because it convinces her to acquiesce to more time for Dad)
- Dads'? (possibly because it convinces him to negotiate more time)
- Perhaps it critical for BOTH to actually participate. If so, families in which only one parent participated, regardless which one, should have lower parenting time

It's the Dads!

Possible interpretations with different policy implications

- Content convinces him of his importance to kids, persuading him to seek greater access to his children.
- The fact that it is the court that is doing the teaching empowers the father with ammunition to counter any opposition a mother may have to him seeking access, quoting the “court”
- Selection effects: the mother who knows a father has attended may see him as being a more dedicated father who deserves more time with the child(ren)
- More selection effects (and artifact): families where fathers flout the order and choose not to attend (who are those who seek and get little time) are eliminated from the analysis, leaving the remainder APPEARING as if it gets more time due to the course

Can rule out last possibility

