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The Parent Trap: Communication About Coparenting Between Divorced Couples

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Investigating Interpersonal Communication

Research in progress for SPCH 1318: Interpersonal Communication

Faculty Mentor: Kerry Loinette, Ph.D.

The following paper represents work produced by a student in an Interpersonal Communication course at Collin College. Students who take interpersonal communication, SPCH 1318, learn about communication in a variety of relationship types including friendship, romantic, familial, and work-place. They are exposed to theories and principles that focus on successful communication behaviors for the creation or initiation of a relationship, the maintenance or care of a relationship, and the termination or ending of a relationship.

In what follows is a student's attempt to understand a very specific interpersonal communication experience. The project addressed how divorced parents perform their coparenting duties. Once a topic is selected, students are then asked to read existing literature about their topic, create an open-ended survey about their topic, analyze the results of their survey, and write a final paper about their topic.

This paper is the result of the semester long research process. Students are provided with a variety of information including how to format, how to write appropriate open-ended questions, and how to analyze data. Students conduct their projects largely outside of class time. Students are encouraged to select and research topics that interest them and provide insight, be it personal or professional, into interpersonal communication.

The Parent Trap: Communication About Coparenting Between Divorced Couples

Elizabeth Farrar

The purpose of this study is to examine how parents who are divorced and who coparent children together communicate and what role technology plays in their communication. In most cases, it is best for parents to coparent so children have both male and female role models, and whether or not parents chose to coparent influences children's behavior following a divorce (Goldberg & Carlson, 2013). To coparent, however, parents must have some sort of relationship and that relationship involves communication.

Determining the prevalence of divorce in the U.S. seems like a straightforward assignment; however, some states do not report marriage and divorce rates to the federal government. Therefore, no exact number exists to report the number of divorces that occur in the U.S. According the National Vital Statistics System, in 2012, 3.4 people out of every 1,000 got a divorce or an annulment, and in 2006, 3.7 out of every 1,000 people got a divorce or annulment (Centers for Disease Control, 2015). These numbers do not include data from California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota (Centers for Disease Control). This data is problematic because the entire population includes minors who are not able to get married as well as couples who are already married. Because of these limitations, it is safe to say that the divorce rate is higher than that which is reported, which is already high.

Method

Participants

To be included in this study, participants needed to be divorced mothers who coparent, married to their ex-partners before the baby was born (not necessarily before conception), married for at least 2 years after the baby was born, and divorced for at least 1 year, they have not remarried since the divorce, and their children were younger than 18 years at the time of the divorce. As a result of these criteria, 11 mothers participated.

The time since their divorces ranged from 11 months to 8 years. The length of time they were married ranged from 2 years to 18 years. All of the children of the mothers surveyed were younger than 18 years at the time of their parents' divorce; the children's ages at the time of the divorce ranged from 3 years to 14 years. Most of the participants had one child at the time of the study, but two participants had two children and one participant had three.

Participants completed a variety of demographic questions, and, according to the demographic questions asked, the youngest mother was 23 years old and the oldest was 42 years old at the time they completed the survey. The closest the ex-partners lived was 2 miles; the farthest distance from Texas, where participants lived, was Maryland. The most often that the ex-partners talk was daily; the least often was "a couple times a month."

Procedures and Instrumentation

The survey used for this study asked six open-ended questions. The open-ended

questions asked each mother to describe how she communicated with her ex-partner, what they communicated about, if they were satisfied with the communication, and if the ex-partners discussed coparenting. The survey ended with six demographic questions. The demographic questions asked the age of the mother and the child, the date of the divorce, the length of the marriage, the geographical distance between the ex-partners, and the frequency of communication.

Most of the surveys were not completed in my presence. Of the 11 surveys, three were completed in my presence, four were given to people to give to their mothers or friends, and two surveys I gave to my mom to give to her friends and were completed in her presence. I gave two people physical copies of the surveys and they completed them on their own and then texted me pictures of the physical copies that they completed.

Data Analysis

When evaluating the answers, I wrote short key phrases— such as “transportation logistics” and “significant others”—on each of the questions to summarize the ideas provided in the answers. I grouped items that had similar ideas, such as “school work” and “how he does in school.” Some of the questions were “yes/no” questions and asked for elaboration. For these, I noted if the mothers answered “yes” or “no,” and I also created categories about their explanation. For example, for a question in which mothers were asked if they discussed coparenting during the divorce, Participant 3 answered, “Yes, he wanted full custody” for a question and Participant 1 answered, “No, he just wanted full custody.” These answers were

categorized differently. I created an Excel spreadsheet and each question had its own column. I wrote the key phrases in the answers and the frequency of each answer in the rows. I also noted on the survey if certain topics went together. For example, six of the 11 mothers answered that they communicated with phone calls, and five of the six also answered that they talk face-to-face.

Results

Question 1 asked mothers if, during the divorce, they discussed how they planned to coparent. Only two themes, discussion occurred and no discussion occurred, emerged from this question. Five of the participants answered that they did not discuss coparenting; six of the participants said they did. The five participants who indicated that they did not discuss coparenting simply said, “No” with the exception of Participant 1, who answered, “No, he just wanted full custody.” Six of the participants answered that they did discuss coparenting, and they all elaborated. Five of the participants who answered, “Yes” said they wanted to do what was best for their children. Participants 8 and 11 said that they wanted to remain civil around the children and not argue. Two participants disagreed with their ex-partners about living situations. Participant 3 said that both parents wanted full custody and had to compromise. Two participants said that they both wanted shared custody; number two said, “We both said 50/50 would be best for [child’s name] so one of us wouldn’t be the favorite.”

Question 2 asked mothers what topics they discuss with their ex-partners regarding the children. The themes that emerged from this question are as follows: schoolwork, health, extracurricular activities, living situations, and scheduling. Ten out of

the 11 mothers replied that they discuss schoolwork. Eight of the 10 participants discuss medical issues and needs. Four mothers said that they discuss schedules about visitation, and they all listed that first. Participant 4 said, “[My daughter] is diabetic—we talk about blood sugar levels and dr. appts.” Participant 10 lives farther away from her ex-partner, so he does not see the child as frequently as some partners who live closer. Participant 10 said, “I try to keep him up to date on activities, milestones, accomplishments, etc. I occasionally have questions about which Star Wars movie [son] is talking about.” Participant 11 said that they discuss the child’s interests and Participant 8 said that they discuss “living situations/changes.”

Question 3 asked participants about the channels of communication they use. Four themes emerged from this question: texting, email, phone calls, and face to face. Ten of the 11 participants listed text messaging as a method of communication that they used. Three participants indicated that they communicate face-to-face, and those three were 31 to 42 years of age. Participant 5 said, “We talk about sports schedule and picking up when he drops the kids off.” Six of the participants said that they use email to communicate, and five said that they talk on the phone. Only Participant 4 did not list text messaging; she indicated that she uses email to communicate with her ex-partner because that method is court-ordered. Participant 8 said that they use “text messages mostly, but in bigger situations a phone call will be made.”

Question 4 asked why participants use the methods they indicated in Question 3. The answers could be categorized into two themes: ease and peace. Eight participants said that they use their preferred method because it is easiest for them. Four

participants gave an answer that indicated they use their methods to “keep the peace.” Participant 1 indicated that she uses text messaging, and she said, “It’s what [ex-partner] wants and I’ve learned to pick my battles after 12 years.” Participant 10 said that she uses email and text messaging, “because seeing his face and hearing his voice pisses me off. That’s the honest truth. I found that the more communication I have with him, the harder it is for me to keep my composure.”

Question 5 asked participants if they are satisfied with the communication they have with their ex-partner. The answers could be divided into two categories: yes and no. Six participants answered yes and five participants answered no. Participant 8 said, “For the most part. I feel like he could communicate better....” Participant 7 said, “I suppose. I’d rather not communicate at all but that’s not really possible while [child] is still in school, so we make the best of it.” The participants who indicated that they are not satisfied with the communication had all been married 5 years or less.

Question 6 asked participants if they communicated about topics not related to the children and, if so, what topics. The answers could be divided into two main categories: yes and no. The answers in the “yes” category also contained its own themes: relationships, work, family, and friends. Seven of the 11 participants said that they do not communicate about topics that do not relate to the children, and four said that they do. Participant 2 said, “[O]ccasionally. We are not terribly close friends, but we chat about our jobs and families.” When asked about what topics other than children they communicate, Participant 10 said, “Our current relationships... He seems to be seeking some kind of approval from me.” Participant 3 indicated that they do not

communicate about topics not related to their child, but “sometimes he tries to strike up a random conversation but I just have no interest in being his friend. I’m civil with him for [child]’s sake, that’s all.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how divorced parents who coparent use technology to communicate within their relationships with their ex-partners. This study found similar results to Markham and Coleman’s (2012) investigation of coparental communication. In that study, mothers who rated their communication as positive communicated with their expartners on topics other than their children (Markham & Coleman). In my study, all of the mothers who indicated that they talk about topics other than their children said that they are satisfied with their communication and had nothing negative to say about their ex-partners.

The five mothers who indicated that they are not satisfied with their communication said in their demographic questions that they communicate on a bi-weekly basis or less frequently, and they were married for 5 years or less, with the exception of Participant 4, who was married for 12 years. There was little connection between with mothers’ level of satisfaction of communication and the length of marriage; the shortest length of time married was 3 years and the longest was 18 years. However, there was relationship present between the frequency of communication and the satisfaction of the communication. The most frequently that the participants who answered they were satisfied was daily, and the least frequently was participant nine who answered, “once a week at the very least.” These results

support the results found in a study by Jamison, Coleman, Ganong, and Feistman (2014); they found that mothers who perceived their coparenting relationships to be positive communicated more often with their ex-partners than mothers with bad relationships.

The same article shares information about lean communication methods that my study did not support. Jamison, Coleman, Ganong, and Feistman (2014) found that couples who were satisfied with their relationships and had more effective communication used lean communication methods more often than did couples who were unsatisfied. The current participants' experiences differ from previous literature; almost no connection existed between the use of lean communication channels and the satisfaction levels of the relationship. The 11 mothers surveyed indicated that they use lean communication methods, and, when asked about their satisfaction of communication, their answers were almost evenly divided. The three participants who listed that they communicate face-to-face mentioned that they do so while picking up and dropping off the children, and they all answered that they were satisfied with their communication with their ex-partners. The three mothers who answered that they talk face-to-face listed a lean communication method in their answer before face-to-face interaction.

The study contradicted and supported evidence in "Communication Technology and Postdivorce Coparenting" (Ganong, Coleman, Feistman, Jamison, & Stafford, 2012). In that study, the researchers discovered that parents who rated their relationship as more positive used lean communication methods and said those

methods made it easier to raise children together (Ganong, Coleman, Feistman, Jamison, & Stafford). While I did not find any connection between positivity of relationship and use of technology, participants did indicate that they used lean communication methods because it made scheduling and communication easier.

According to Heath and Bryant (2012), most people find disclosing information to be gratifying, so I have no reason to believe that the participants withheld any pertinent information; however, I do not have a close relationship with most of the participants in this study. Social Penetration Theory states that as relationships progress, more information is disclosed and more kinds of information are disclosed (Altman & Taylor, 1987). Assuming Social Penetration Theory applies to these relationships, participants might only share superficial information with me.

This study shows that technology is present in almost every, if not every, coparenting situation. Whereas other studies (e.g., Jamison, Coleman, Ganong, & Feistman, 2014) found that communication via technology has a positive effect on coparental relationship satisfaction levels, I found both people who were satisfied with their coparental relationship and people who were unsatisfied used technology. With this information, divorced partners who plan to coparent can use technology to communicate in a healthy way.

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