

## **Divorce and Children E-mail In-service Evaluation Results**

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### **HIGHLIGHTS**

- 45 county and district faculty participated in an e-mail in-service on children and divorce.
- About one-half of this group were regular users of electronic communications.
- Participants spent 20 hours reading e-mail lectures, doing activities and discussing issues.
- Participants rated the educational activities as useful & 81% indicated learning new ideas.
- Self-study was liked for convenience, but hard to manage with competing demands.
- 84% indicated they wanted more in-service offered in this format.

### **Detailed Results**

This report presents a summary of the evaluation results from an e-mail in-service course for professionals.

**Course Description.** In Jan-Feb, 1996 I conducted an e-mail in-service course about issues related to children and divorce. (See Hughes, 1996). The participants subscribed to an electronic list server that allowed everyone to jointly discuss information. The course consisted of a series of six e-mail sessions that provided information and discussion questions. Following the posting of the session participants were given a series of discussion questions and activities and encouraged to post their ideas. A panel of experts in divorce research and intervention also were enlisted to discuss the ideas presented in each session. There were also weekly reading assignments for the course.

**Course development.** This was the first time the primary instructor of this course conducted an electronic in-service. At least 50 hours were spent developing the ideas for the course. This involved discussions with colleagues, contacting experts in the field of distance education and planning the implementation. Another 50 hours were spent in developing the actual electronic sessions, and about 10 hours were spent on various logistical issues. Ten hours were spent the first week of the course handling questions regarding logistical problems. Each week about 2 to 3 hours were spent reading and responding to messages. (This number depends on the amount of participation.)

**The participants.** A total of 45 people participated in the course. Most (n = 39) were county extension agents, but there were also a few district specialists, state specialists, and students who also participated. The feedback presented below only includes the county and district staff (n = 41) for which the in-service was primarily designed. There were 38 completed evaluation forms representing 93% of the participants.

The majority of participants were women (n= 92%) and the mean number of years experience was 15 years. Most of the participants identified their primary area of specialization as family life (65%), but 18 percent indicated that family resource management was their area of

specialization. There were also participants with specialization areas of nutrition and youth development. In regards to experience working with divorcing families, most indicated that they occasionally worked with these families (51%), but 24% indicated that they regularly worked with these families.

Due to the nature of the delivery mode, questions were also asked about access to computers and to the general level of electronic activity. Thirty-five percent indicated that they had a computer with modem capability, 30% indicated that they had access to an open computer for the entire office, and another 24% indicated that they had their own computer, but no modem. A small percentage (11%) indicated that they shared a computer and modem with a secretary. In terms of the amount of usage of computers, 32% indicated that they never personally use e-mail, 16% occasionally use e-mail, 27% regularly use e-mail and another 24% use e-mail plus other electronic resource tools such as Gopher and the World Wide Web. Thus, slightly over half of this group were regular users of electronic communication technologies.

**Participation levels.** A primary question was the extent to which the participants took part in the educational activities that were presented. They were asked to rate five activities on a five-point scale from never (1) to very often (5). The results indicated that they often read the e-mail sessions ( $M = 4.2$ ) and they sometimes read the book ( $M = 3.3$ ). In terms of their participation in the discussion, they indicated that they often read the messages posted by others ( $M = 4.2$ ), however, overall, they seldom did the activities suggested ( $M = 2.3$ ) and they seldom made a comment on the discussion itself ( $M = 1.6$ ). Overall, about half of the participants indicated that they sometimes to very often did the discussion activities and about twenty-five percent made a comment sometimes to very often.

It was also of interest to know whether participants read the material on-line, that is, on their computer screens or printed the material. Also, it was interesting to know whether they were actually typing their own comments or having this done by a secretary. Overall, only a small portion of the participants read the material often or very often on the screen (17.2%). Most either printed the material themselves or someone else printed it. Overall, only 35% indicated that they typed the responses themselves, but since this was also a low frequency activity this may say less about how they participated than that many did not do this at all.

Participants were also asked about the number of times they actually sent an e-mail message to the discussion group, to someone else on a topic related to the in-service or explored electronic resources that were identified in the course. As the instructor I had set some initial expectations for the participants that they would all post at least two messages to the group. Here the course was less successful. Only 34% posted messages to the group. Another 26% sent messages to others regarding the topic, however, about 66% indicated that they did some exploration of other electronic resources as a part of this course.

**Time spent participating.** Participants were also asked to give a rough estimate of the amount of time they spent on this in-service program each week. The first question was about how much time they spent simply trying to obtain the material via the computer. (When technology doesn't work it can be a source of great frustration.) Importantly, about half (53%) indicated that they

spent no time trying to obtain the material and on average they indicated that they spent about 20 minutes each week on this aspect of the in-service.

Overall, the participants indicated that they spent 3.5 hours each week reading the e-mail sessions and book and, doing the activities. In terms of the amount of time they spent on each part of the in-service each week, they indicated that they spent about one hour reading the sessions ( $M = .97$  hours), 1.4 hours reading the book, about 35 minutes doing the activities, and roughly 38 minutes reading the discussion material presented by other participants. Over the course of the six week period, this would indicate that the average participant in this in-service spent 20.8 hours involved in this in-service.

**Usefulness of the teaching activities.** There were a variety of teaching methods used in this in-service including both reading material and doing learning activities. Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of the components on a four-point scale from not at all useful (1) to very useful (4). The e-mail sessions themselves received the highest ratings for usefulness ( $M = 3.4$ ) indicating they were rated midway between useful and very useful. The book was rated about the same ( $M = 3.3$ ), followed by the discussion activities ( $M = 2.7$ ), the panel of experts ( $M = 2.8$ ), and the discussion ( $M = 2.7$ ). Roughly, one could summarize these ratings by saying that most the teaching components were judged useful.

Another way to examine the results is to consider the percentage of participants who rated any of the activities as not at all useful. The activity that received the highest percentage of responses as not useful at all was the discussion and only 13% of the participants rated this activity in this manner. Ten percent or less rated any of the other activities as not at all useful.

**Satisfaction with the in-service.** A series of six statements regarding satisfaction and reactions to the session were presented to the participants for their consideration. They were asked to rate the statements in terms of their agreement or disagreement with (1) indicating strong disagreement and (5) for strong agreement. The first statement asked them to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the "program would have been more effective if taught in a traditional face-to-face setting." The mean for the group was 2.8 suggesting neither agreement or disagreement. Interestingly, the breakdown was as follows: 43% disagreed and 21% agreed with the remainder (35%) falling into the neither disagree or agree category. Clearly, about twenty percent of the group indicated that they course would have been more effective in the face-to-face format, nevertheless, twice as many indicated that they did not think this was true. Interestingly, they were next asked whether they agreed or disagreed with whether more courses should be offered in an electronic format and 84% indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Sixty-eight percent indicated that they enjoyed the course and only 3% registered a dislike of the experience.

Participants were also asked open-ended questions about what they liked or disliked. Almost eighty percent (79%) of the participants made some comment about the flexibility, not having to travel or the convenience of the delivery method, yet two-thirds also indicated that they experienced some types of dilemmas in managing time for this work along with other responsibilities. A typical comment was, "I liked the fact that we didn't have to travel to take this

in-service. It took more time and work on the part of the participant, and there were distractions around the office preventing me from focusing on the material like I would if on campus."

The other most frequently liked aspects of the in-service were the interactive/discussion format with the other participants (21% mentioned this) and the quality or timeliness of the information (18% mentioned this). In terms of dislikes there were several comments about frustrations with limited access to a computer with a modem or difficulties with electronic communication technologies (16%) and 11% indicated that there was too much reading or material presented. Even among those who expressed frustration about computers there were several comments like this one: "I received (10+) electronic postmaster messages. I gained a 'new' level of patience.... Now that the course is over I was able to send my first communication to another student."

The results also indicated that the participants felt that they gained some knowledge and ideas from the course. Eighty-one percent reported that they learned something from the course, 73% indicated that they got new ideas for working with divorcing families and 73% stated that they would be spending more time using electronic resources for developing programs.

Since there was wide variation in the amount of experience using computers and in teaching divorcing families, the satisfaction scores were compared across groups of participants. No differences were found in satisfaction with the course between participants who had high or low amounts of experience teaching divorcing families. Likewise, no differences were found among participant satisfaction due to the amount of experience using electronic communications. There was one difference in participant's reports on their expectations for using electronic resources in programming that indicated that those people with computers and modems were more likely to report that they would be using electronic resources for programming than participants who had other types of office setups. Overall, these are positive results because it suggests that there are not great differences in participant's experience or reactions to electronic in-service programs despite a fairly wide range of computer access and technical experience.

### **Cost Comparison with Meeting**

For comparison purposes a rough calculation was made of the relative costs of this electronic in-service program with a meeting. To make this comparison the following assumptions were made: (1) an equal number of people would have taken the course (N= 38), (2) an equivalent meeting would have taken two days, (3) everyone would have traveled and stayed over one night (@ \$75.00) and eaten four meals (total cost of \$39.00), and received a mileage reimbursement of \$ .31 per mile for 180 miles, and spent four hours traveling (@ rate of \$18.65 per hour based on an average salary of \$37,302.), and (5) we wouldn't have been snowed out.

The travel costs (lodging, food, and mileage) would amount to \$6,452. The time lost due to travel would be 152 hours or \$2,835.00 spent in downtime. The total cost of the equivalent meeting in-service to accomplish the same in-service goals would be \$9,287.00. These costs would not be incurred in the electronic version of this session.

The electronic version has some costs that would not occur in the meeting format. These would be for telephone and computer use. There were also probably some costs in secretarial time due

to managing additional electronic communications traffic. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that these costs would be equivalent to the meeting format.

### **Some Personal Reflections**

Just as the participants often underestimated the time demands of this type of teaching, so did I. In the future I will schedule at least one-half day per week to support this type of in-service. This teaching demanded more (maybe twice as much) preparation as similar teaching face-to-face because everything had to be written. However, I know have a completed course that could be taught again to other groups. In retrospect, I think each session should have been shorter and/or spaced out for more than one week-- perhaps two short sessions per week. I also think I would do more to encourage interaction among the participants. I think I might design a reading guide for each of the readings and electronic sessions. Again this would probably work better with shorter sessions. There are clearly some limits on this type of teaching, this will not work for skills or for more complicated material. However, electronic communications should be one of many delivery formats that we use.

### **Summary**

These results indicate that the overall effort to create an electronic in-service program was successful. Participants were enthusiastic about the course and found the content of the program useful. Most participants liked the flexibility and convenience of the e-mail format, but found it challenging to find time to include this work in their schedule. Nevertheless, the eighty percent endorsement of this teaching format suggests that others should consider the use of this methodology.

### **References**

Hughes, R., Jr. (1996). Children and Divorce: An Internet Inservice Experience for Professionals. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University. Retrieved March 26, 2009, from archival address: <http://web.archive.org/web/20050416111441/http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/divorce/childins/index.htm>

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