


RESEARCH

Transformative change comes from more than structured content: Qualitative exploration of parent experiences of a post-separation group program

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Abstract

Objective: In this research, we explore participant experiences of a post-separation parenting program as a protective factor for helping with post-separation adjustment.

Background: Separation is a difficult process for children and families. It often involves distress and conflict that can negatively affect well-being. Post-separation programs are a protective factor to help parents adjust post-separation. However, there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring how these programs help with post-separation adjustment.

Method: In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with a sample of 13 parents who had attended a post-separation program. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Two reviewers independently coded data inductively, and coding was subsequently independently reviewed by a third reviewer.

Results: Group processes accompanying the program helped participants reduce distress in the acute post-separation phase. Participants reported enhanced management of personal responses to the separation that contributed to personal development. Peer learning and support during this phase may be a relatively unexplored area.

Conclusion: Post-separation programs that normalize separation and include practical strategies for emotion regulation and effective communication may be helpful for individuals' adjustment post-separation.

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Implications: Post-separation programs should be offered by organizations that support separated parents to help adjust during the early phase of separation.

KEYWORDS

co-parenting, divorce education, divorce–stress–adjustment model, parent perspectives, parenting, thematic analysis

Approximately a third of marriages in Australia end in divorce, and almost half involve children under 18 years of age (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021). These statistics do not include separating unmarried couples with children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020), and therefore the number of affected individuals is likely to be higher given that 15% of Australian families are one-parent families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Separation is traumatic, life-changing, and thrusts individuals into an abnormal situation (Russell et al., 2021; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). Some separated individuals who experience high-conflict separations express feeling judged and shamed despite their best efforts in adjusting to the separation process (Treloar, 2019). Stressors related to separation (e.g., emotional dysregulation, communication difficulties) can contribute to psychological distress and mental health problems (Coleman & Glenn, 2010; D’Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Hughes & Waite, 2009; Sbarra & Whisman, 2022).

The early stages of post-separation are especially challenging (Ferraro et al., 2016) but are critical for establishing the co-parent relationship (Emery, 2012; Petren et al., 2021). For most people, the psychological distress often associated with separation attenuates in the 2 years post-separation (Amato, 2010; Halford & Sweeper, 2013). Despite this decline, chronic stress associated with co-parenting conflict tends to remain stable (Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Moral et al., 2021). Indeed, more favorable attitudes toward co-parenting (Jewell et al., 2017) and other positive changes (e.g., communicate effectively to resolve conflict) can occur when individuals are empowered and have agency (Treloar, 2019). Therefore, it is critical that individuals develop skills and knowledge to navigate the particularly challenging early stages of post-separation to safeguard their personal and their children’s well-being and to strengthen the co-parenting relationship.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The divorce–stress–adjustment model, displayed in Figure 1, is useful for understanding and researching post-separation adjustment (Amato, 2000). This model is grounded within a stress framework, views separation as a process (as opposed to an event), and draws on notions of risk, coping, and resilience (Amato, 2000). The model suggests that post-separation adjustment is influenced by stressors resulting from relationship breakdown and subsequent separation, and protective factors. Post-separation stressors include custodial responsibilities, ongoing conflict with the ex-spouse, lack of emotional support, financial difficulties, and other disruptive separation-related events. The divorce–stress–adjustment perspective posits that individuals may experience adverse emotional, psychological, and physical outcomes in response to these stressors, influencing their ability to adjust to divorce.

Protective factors that cushion the impact of divorce may be located within the individual (e.g., self-efficacy), interpersonal supports (e.g., friendships), and structural resources (e.g., post-separation programs). These protective factors may help with a short-term crisis or long-term chronic strain as shown in Figure 1. According to the short-term crisis submodel, resources (e.g., post-separation parenting programs) may accelerate an individual’s post-separation adjustment. However, over time, most people will return to their pre-separation levels of functioning. Conversely, within the chronic strain sub-model, many stressors

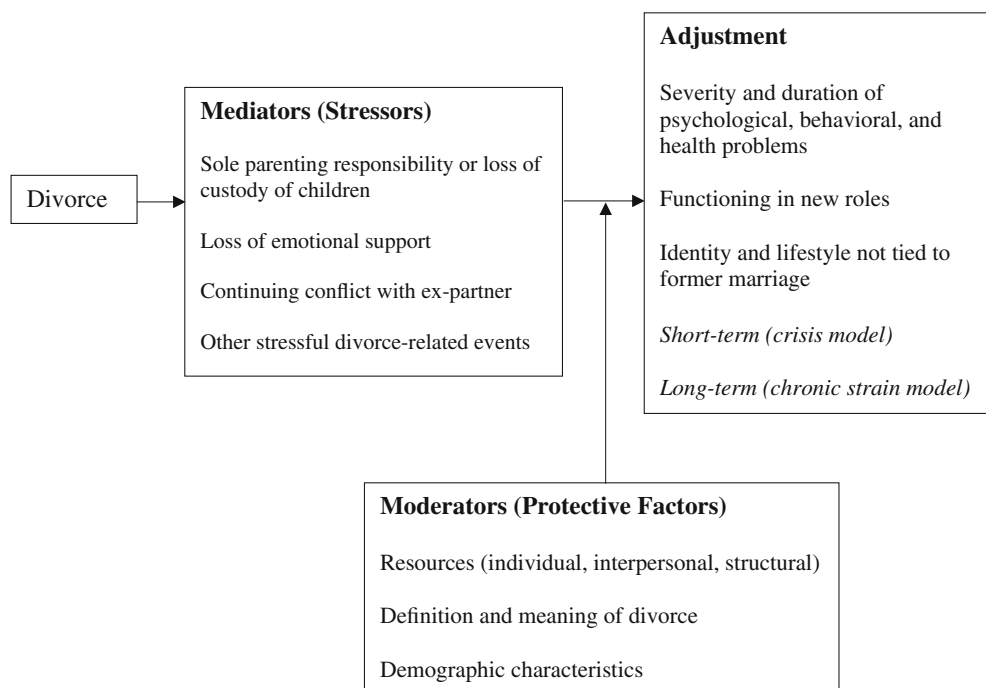


FIGURE 1 Amato’s (2000) divorce–stress–adjustment model. *Note.* Adapted from “The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children,” by P. R. Amato, 2000, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), p. 1271. Copyright 2000 Amato

(e.g., ongoing conflict and financial hardship) may contribute to an indefinite decline in well-being. The outcomes and speed at which adjustment occurs post-separation may depend on protective factors available to an individual. Pertinent to this study is the need to understand how a structural protective factor such as a post-separation parenting program could potentially help individuals adjust post-separation.

The content of post-separation parenting programs is important. A recent review of 103 studies focused on content within post-separation parenting programs identified three tiers of priority (Schramm et al., 2018). Tier 1 is focused on child-centered content. This includes topics such as the impact of divorce on children, interparental conflict, and positive co-parenting skills. Tier 2 is strategic adult-centered content and examines personal issues such as grief and separation-related issues (e.g., financial impact). Tier 3 content includes unique circumstances that affect some (but not all) individuals through the divorce process and are added to programs as needed (e.g., domestic violence). These three tiers are similar to the three-level model suggested by Salem et al. (2013), who proposed different goals, content, and format for each level, allowing programs to meet a broader range of parental needs. Whilst there may be a wide variety of content available for use within parenting programs, there is consensus on essential topics and the need for flexibility. Some of the topics regularly addressed in programs include the impact of interparental conflict on children, emotion regulation, and communication.

THE SEPARATED PARENTS ARE RAISING KIDS PROGRAM

The Separated Parents Are Raising Kids Program (SPARK Program[®]) is a six-module (with an optional seventh module) post-separation parenting program and is the focus of this study. The program was developed by CatholicCare Social Services Southern Queensland, Australia. The

SPARK Program is designed to educate and support high-conflict, separated parents to adjust and cope with the dual challenges of separation and raising children. Parents are informed about the contents of each module via CatholicCare Social Services Southern Queensland's website and/or if attending the organization's Family Relationship Centre. The program is delivered in a face-to-face psychoeducational group setting at a Family Relationship Centre. Each session is 2 hours and covers core concepts (e.g., conflict management through conflict resolution styles, effects of conflict on children) through information and discussion. The sessions are designed to allow facilitators the flexibility to stimulate and encourage peer-led discussions while providing pertinent information for each concept. The program covers two modules per week in a nonsequential order. Because the modules are delivered nonsequentially, parents can start at any time that suits them and are informed of the module schedules when contacting the organization to start the registration process. Facilitators make record of the modules completed by each participant to catalogue attendance; however, there are no follow-up sessions to see whether strategies are implemented beyond the current program scope. The number of participants attending each session ranges from four to 10, with 196 participants completing the program over an 18-month period. Participants may attend voluntarily, be court-mandated, referred internally, or referred from other sources, including domestic violence service providers, general practitioners, police, solicitors, or other local community organizations. These referral sources may also help individuals decide what module(s) to attend.

For the effective management and evaluation of social programs, program stakeholders need to understand what the program intends to do and how it will achieve those intentions (Peyton & Scicchitano, 2017). A program logic model is a planning and evaluation tool for programs that visually outlines the resources required for the program to operate, the activities that the program completes, and the anticipated outcomes for program attendees (McCoy & Castner, 2020). Further, because program logic models include desired outcomes, they can help guide research questions when evaluating parenting programs (Stolz et al., 2017).

The research team developed the program logic for the SPARK Program using data collected through interviews with the program developers and facilitators. As such, the program logic model for the SPARK Program is displayed in Figure 2. The six modules offered in the SPARK Program are conflict management, the court system, communication skills, attachment and development, impact of conflict, and emotional regulation. The program content is based on Schramm et al.'s (2018) three tiers of priority content for post-separation parenting programs. Tier 1 content includes psychosocial development stages and attachment, exploring the impact of conflict on both children and parents; Tier 2 content comprises conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and information about the Australian Family Court system. The optional blended families module is Tier 3 content and prepares parents for future relationships that may integrate children from two families. The intended participant outcomes of the SPARK Program include empowering individuals through developing or improving attitudes toward co-parenting, supporting self-knowledge through the development of knowledge and skills, reducing conflict between separated parents to enable parenting negotiations, and improving parental and child well-being.

A recent inquiry into Australia's family law system (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2019) recommended Family Relationship Centres expand services to enhance support for separating families. An expansion opportunity for Family Relationship Centres includes either referring or, ideally, delivering post-separation parenting programs. Therefore, the current evaluation of the SPARK Program is timely.

POST-SEPARATION PARENTING PROGRAM RESEARCH GAPS

Little research has focused on separated parents' experiences during the early stages of the post-separation process (Ferraro et al., 2016). Research that explores what helps to change mindsets and improve attitudes toward co-parenting is necessary to improve the effectiveness of post-

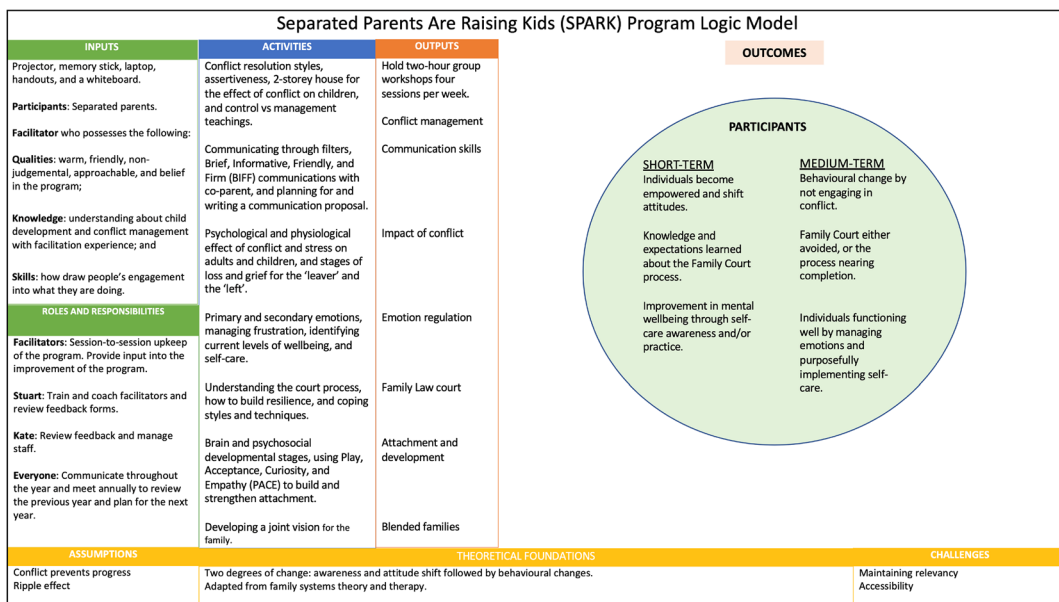


FIGURE 2 Separated Parents Are Raising Kids Program logic model [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

separation parenting programs (Cronin et al., 2017; Jewell et al., 2017). However, qualitative evaluations typically report *what* parents perceived about the program as useful but often overlook *how* programs potentially help parents to adjust post-separation (Choi et al., 2018). This difference is important because understanding the impact of a program on an individual's post-separation adjustment can be useful for improving the program. There remains a gap in the literature with little prior research qualitatively exploring both participants' and stakeholders' perceptions and experiences with programs (Brotherson et al., 2010). Further research is needed to explore the nature of stressors related to separation and their potential impact on an individual post-separation (Barth et al., 2020). To capture participants' potential changes in knowledge, understanding, and behavior, it is necessary to develop interview guides beyond those that only explore what participants found valuable about a program (Schramm & McCaulley, 2012). Therefore, it is advantageous when evaluating post-separation parenting programs to understand how participants perceived the program's effectiveness, particularly whether and how the program helped to adjust and shift their co-parenting attitudes during the critical early stages of separation.

For post-separation parenting programs to evolve, remain relevant, and thrive, continual research and evaluation are required (Sanders & Kirby, 2015). Given the upcoming reforms, a pilot evaluation of the SPARK Program prompted the organization to review whether the program is achieving desired outcomes and identifying potential areas for improvement. Importantly, as Brotherson et al. (2010) identified, there is a gap in the literature with limited prior research exploring both stakeholders' and participants' experiences of parenting programs. To redress this gap, the current study draws on program developer perspectives (e.g., a program logic model) coupled with a qualitative exploration of participant perceptions of the program in helping parents adjust in the early stages of separation.

RESEARCH AIM

It is timely to evaluate the SPARK Program because (a) there is dearth of research regarding how post-separation parenting programs can help individuals adjust in the critical early stages

post-separation; (b) the program has not been evaluated previously; (c) given the participant gap noted, the current study redresses this imbalance by drawing on program developer perspectives (e.g., a program logic model) coupled with a qualitative exploration of participant perceptions of the program in helping parents adjust in the early stages of separation; and (d) to prepare for Australian government reforms that include the recommendation to expand the use of post-separation programs. Similar to Stolz et al. (2017), the SPARK Program logic model guides the following research question: How does the SPARK Program help individuals adjust during the early stages post-separation?

METHOD

The data from this study were collected as part of a larger ongoing research partnership between CatholicCare Social Services Southern Queensland and the University of Southern Queensland. Figure 3 displays an overview of the methodological pathway. The University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee provided ethical approval (H20REA054). The research design considered the need to uphold confidentiality and anonymity to support and maintain the well-being of participants and to treat their views with respect. All research output has been deidentified, and participant numbers do not reflect the order in which they were interviewed to further uphold anonymity. Participants were informed before giving their consent about the way the research outputs would be disseminated. All participants

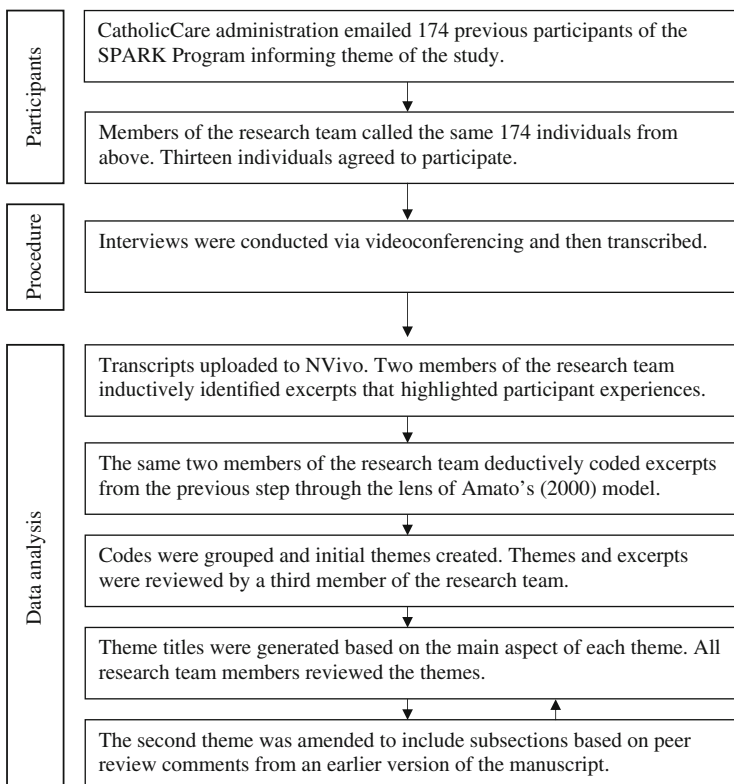


FIGURE 3 Methodological pathway

consented to having their interview audio- and video-recorded and their data retained for 5 years.

Participants

To be eligible for the study, participants had to be parents who separated less than 3 years earlier and attended at least one module of the SPARK Program in person in the 2 years the program had been operating. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. First, CatholicCare emailed potential participants who were identified from a list of previous participants of the SPARK Program. The email contained a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. It informed the recipient that they would be contacted by a member of the research team to further discuss the study. Second, members of the research team contacted potential participants via telephone calls. Potential participants were provided with the opportunity to have questions answered or concerns addressed before deciding whether to take part. Thirteen participants from a potential 174 participants that were contacted agreed to participate. As can be seen in Table 1, most participants were female, had more than one child, attended the program voluntarily, and attended six modules. The number of mediation and court-related appointments associated with separation ranged from “only mediation” to “at least a dozen.”

Procedure

Data was collected from interviews conducted online via videoconferencing. Consent was rechecked at the commencement of each interview. A semistructured interview guide was used. Questions were selected to reflect the outputs from the program logic presented earlier in Figure 1. The main questions addressed general experience of the program (“In what way did you find the SPARK Program helpful or beneficial to you?”), parent–child relationship (“Have you changed any of your behaviors when you’re with your child as a result of the SPARK Program?”) relationship with the other parent (“Can you please tell me how your relationship is

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics

Participant	Gender	Number of children	Modules attended	Mandatory or voluntary program participation
1	Female	3	7	Voluntary
2	Female	2	6	Mandatory
3	Female	4	6	Voluntary
4	Male	3	6	Voluntary
5	Female	1	6	Voluntary
6	Female	1	6	Mandatory
7	Male	1	7	Voluntary
8	Female	2	4	Voluntary
9	Male	4	6	Mandatory
10	Female	4	7	Voluntary
11	Female	4	6	Unsure
12	Male	5	6	Voluntary
13	Female	4	4	Voluntary

with the other parent of your child/ren”), self-care (“Did you learn any specific self-care skills from the SPARK program that you have found particularly useful?”). The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were informed that they could request a copy of the transcript; however, this option was not taken by any participant. Transcriptions and recordings were stored on the university intranet Microsoft OneDrive Australia’s Academic and Research Network cloud service and on a biometric and password-protected computer.

Data analysis

Data were uploaded and analyzed using NVivo (version 12, QSR International, 2018). Analysis was based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012) thematic analysis guidelines that included familiarization of the data, coding, theme development, and revision of themes. Analysis was conducted at the semantic level using explicit and surface meanings of the data. Excerpts were selected to accurately reflect participants’ perceptions. Two members of the research team completed the first four steps of data analysis.

First, to confirm transcription accuracy, two members of the research team listened to the interviews and read and reread the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Second, the same two members of the research team independently identified excerpts that indicated participants’ experiences from attending the SPARK Program. These excerpts were first identified and coded inductively through repeated mentions and common experiences. After this, Amato’s (2000) model guided deductive coding of the inductively coded excerpts. Amato referred to factors that reduce separation-related stress as protective factors, and this helped guide the deductive coding as the two members explored the excerpts for factors or experiences that appeared to reduce stress (e.g., “it probably would have been a lot less stressful than what it has been” [Participant 10]). Third, these codes were then grouped together into related ideas and consideration was given for explanatory themes. Two initial themes were subsequently created from this stage of coding and reviewed to identify potential overlapping of themes. Fourth, the initial two themes were refined by redrawing boundaries to clarify relationships and meaningfully represent the data in light of the research question. This included delineating the themes of normalizing and adjusting in greater detail. Fifth, a third member of the research team reviewed transcripts (in NVivo) and lines before and after quotes were considered to confirm context. The third team member also reviewed potential themes within NVivo to refine the coding frame and ensure interpretations reflected the data. Finally, analysis was finalized by all team members reviewing patterns and comparisons across themes to generate and review theme titles. The second theme was further refined and broken down into subsections based on peer-review comments.

Locating the researchers that completed data analysis

To address possible bias in analysis, Lockwood et al. (2015) recommended including a statement that culturally locates the researcher. Both individuals who completed data analysis are Caucasian and married and neither had a preexisting relationship with CatholicCare or the SPARK Program. One individual is a male graduate student and was raised in a single-parent household. The second individual is a female honors student and was raised with both parents present. Therefore, the two researchers brought different perspectives to the data regarding separation. Potential biases such as confirmation bias toward the merit of separation may arise from the fact that the two individuals are both married and were raised in different family compositions. Still, each researcher took care to prevent preexisting assumptions using the bracketing technique.

RESULTS

All 13 participants spoke positively and valued the SPARK Program. Despite initial doubts about the program and how it might help them, all participants were thankful for the opportunity to attend the program. The two themes were identified from inductive coding followed by deductive coding that was guided by Amato’s (2000) model. As displayed in Table 2, the themes are normalizing separation through shared experiences and adjusting to separation. Each theme is discussed next.

Theme 1: Normalizing separation through shared experiences

The first theme is about participants’ appreciation of attending and learning from facilitators and peers within a group environment that helped toward normalizing the separation process. Normalization refers to the process of the individual understanding that their family circumstances, as well as their personal reactions, are shared by others in similar situations (Hamama, 2022; Knafl et al., 2010). The SPARK Program helped to normalize the experience of the “taboo subject” (Participant 3) because “it was beneficial in the sense of understanding ... challenges weren’t unique to me or my situation” (Participant 8). Further, “everyone’s got a different story, but at the end of the day, we usually are having the same sort of battles” (Participant 13). Participant 10 added:

You do feel very, very alone when you’re going through all of this. ... The thing I really super liked about the SPARK Program was that you did interact a little bit with other parents going through the same sort of hurdles ... a feeling that there is normality in, and in I guess, in a situation where you feel it’s unbelievably abnormal.

Discussing and normalizing an abnormal experience may assist individuals who potentially perceive their situation as unresolvable by having the group “talk to other people around the experience, the issue, how they deal with it” (Participant 5). In the instance where there was less discussion with peers and therefore potentially less normalization, it was referred to as a missed opportunity for small groups to have the chance to have “discussions and really nutting out (i.e., brainstorming, working out resolutions) some of the issues that we’d been having” (Participant 3) and “more discussion within the group would help to make the program more enjoyable and easier to get the message across” (Participant 5). This shows that while participants appreciate that the

TABLE 2 Themes generated from a thematic analysis of participant interviews

Theme	Initial codes contributing to theme	Theme title	Description
Theme 1	Sharing the experience; validation of existing strategies; understanding children’s perspective and how to support them; increasing confidence and self-worth; placing the children at the forefront of decision-making; and reflection	Normalizing separation through shared experiences	“A feeling that there is normality in ... a situation where you feel it’s unbelievably abnormal”
Theme 2	Emotional regulation; communication strategies; change in attitude; improvement in parenting techniques and behaviors; and reflection	Adjusting to separation	“You can either fix it now because you’re aware of it or you can crash and burn and have a meltdown”

facilitator is knowledgeable, the deeper discussion of issues with others working through separation is what was most valued. This may be due to normalizing and validating the process of separation.

Besides normalizing the experience, participants benefited from learning from each other—or peer learning. The group “was very validating. It was validating in the sense of I know I’m a good parent, and I know that I’m trying to do the right thing” (Participant 11). This validation appears to have eased anxieties about single parenting. Another participant learned from their peer about developing their relationship with their son: “I just could not click on how to build the bridge with my son. Once one of the girls explained it to me, she’d had to do it, that’s when the penny finally dropped” (Participant 4). Participant 9 highlighted the benefits he received from group members whom he regarded as more experienced than he was:

Meeting more parents that [are] going through the same situation and the interactions we had with, I had with them. And talking about our children and how, how to deal with when the child does, doesn’t completely understand what’s happening.

As seen in this excerpt, the participant started describing the benefit of understanding difficulties for individuals in similar situations. This normalized the experience for this participant as he became aware that his difficulties were not unique but common. Importantly, the participant became aware that, in addition to his experience being normalized, he could learn how to support his children who do not understand the separation process. This is important because the participant gained knowledge from a peer that helped normalize the experience for his children. Thus, not only does taking part in the program help parents normalize their experiences, but it helped normalize the experience for his children.

Theme 2: Adjusting to separation

The journey of post-separation parenting involves navigating complex and difficult changes, involving significant adjustments from both people in the separated dyad. The second theme captures participant reflections on how they benefited from the group to support their process of change and personal transformation in areas such as communication, emotional, and attitude adjustments.

Participants reflected on their personal development as they were adjusting to separation, “she’s [co-parent] just seen the development I’ve been through. That’s come out of the—the hardship and turmoil and trauma of the court case, and the separation and the time away from the kids, and the isolation” (Participant 9). Further, “So building up the person who I was before the relationship, getting back to myself was the hardest bit. To, you know, break down those years of abuse” (Participant 3). Contributing aspects of participant’s personal development were evident in the way participants communicated with others, in their behaviors, and in their attitude shifts.

Communication adjustments

Several parents spoke about communication changes related to the co-parent. Participant 7, speaking in broken English, described that post-separation was difficult for him due to legal and cultural differences.

[I am] from other country and the cultural differences and the law system is quite different. And so I personally found the SPARK Program really helpful to me. So give me to understand, basically the family law’s structure, the system ... which

benefits me to enhance my understanding and knowledge about how to communicate with the other party.

For this participant, it was about gaining knowledge and understanding to communicate within a different cultural environment. For another participant the “SPARK Program enhance[d] my understanding and knowledge about how to communicate with the other party” (Participant 8) and this helped to

just listen and try and hear things from their point of view ... if I had of known stuff like that going back, you know, going back 12 months ago, it probably would have been a lot less stressful than what it has been. (Participant 10)

Participant 9 described the results of them “putting a positive light on the situation” and “working together” [with the other parent] to achieve an increase in communications:

I was in no contact. Emails only ... there was supervised changeovers all the time ... I had the kids for less amount of time then. Now, changeovers are just at my place, other place, or at McDonald’s or wherever. Communication is a lot better.

What is apparent from these excerpts is that listening underpins their communication skills and by extension, their adjustment. However, for other participants listening was insufficient.

Emotional adjustments

Previous excerpts demonstrated that it is necessary to listen to the other co-parent to improve communication skills but communications and behaviors from the other party can be unexpected and perceived as problematic. It is in these instances that conflict potentially erupts and destabilizes the adjustment process. However, what participants reported is that they learned how to cope and self-regulate emotionally when unexpected and undesirable behaviors from their ex-partners occurred. For example, one participant noted that

whatever the other parent does, I cannot control it. Like, if he’s going to do the wrong thing, or, you know, not put our child first ... it’s my job as the—I’m going say protective parent—to emotionally regulate myself ... the SPARK Program helped me to just really get the gravity of that, I guess the weight of that, and helped me to not react as much. (Participant 9)

Managing emotions was also helpful for Participant 5 because they learned to “shift the emotion and anger or anxiety away and focus on the current situation in a manageable emotion.” Furthermore, Participant 8 shifted from not coping with unforeseen happenings to remaining calm when they occur:

I’m a lot more calm, calmer and able to sort of, I don’t know, I don’t know what the word is that, you know, when something is thrown at you that’s unexpected. I guess before I probably would have just completely not been able to cope very well and it would consume me. But now I’m much more able to just take things as they come and not let everything worry me.

Attitude adjustments

Self-centered attitudes also shifted toward improving the co-parent relationship for their children's benefit. For example, "new ways of thinking ... your own kind of mental attitude ... to do the things in the best interests of the kids and not for selfish reasons" (Participant 3). For another participant, a different way of thinking helped them to reinvent their attitude toward parenting:

I've changed the way I look at myself, the way I value myself as a father ... I've gone OK, I'm going to start behaving like this. This is how a better parent would behave. This is how I should be able to behave. This is what my children should have. (Participant 4)

The shift in parenting attitudes is repeated by another participant who was reminded that it is more than two adults experiencing post-separation adjustment:

Helping me to open my eyes to think this issue is not just me going through this court process, it's not just affecting my ex-husband and myself. It's also how it affects my daughter's physical and mental health and how I can support her in that way. So I do believe the SPARK Program has helped to support me in order to support my daughter through this process and through being a single mum. (Participant 5)

Taken together, the results indicate that the SPARK Program helped contribute to transformative changes post-separation. For some participants this was improving communication skills, other participants adjusted emotionally, and some self-centered attitudes shifted to focus on the children.

DISCUSSION

This study explored participants' experiences of the SPARK Program to gain a better understanding of how the program helped individuals adjust post-separation. These findings might be considered in the development and delivery of post-separation programs. Partnering with participants to seek feedback helps ensure that programs continue to meet the user's needs and preferences. A robust process of involving participants, theory, and research is more likely to produce a program that is evidence-based, engaging, feasible, and acceptable. From a theoretical perspective, the results align with Amato (2000) and Schramm et al. (2018) because the findings indicate that the SPARK Program served as a protective factor for participants in post-separation adjustment by normalizing and validating their lived experiences. The data suggest that this post-separation program can help accelerate adjustment for parents within the short term (crisis phase) of Amato's model. This is a novel finding, suggesting that this post-separation program was able to mitigate divorce-related stressors within the first few years of separation; this acceleration of mitigation is not part of the current model. Given that research suggests this immediate post-separation phase is a high-risk period for psychological distress (Moral et al., 2021), our findings highlight the need for further investigation into the manifestation of the Amato model in the immediate post-separation years and its implications for psychosocial intervention and supports. Central to mitigating these stressors for participants included emotionally regulating their personal response to separation and the program appears to facilitate a shift in focus among participants—from personal reactions (e.g., grief, feeling resentment toward ex-partner) to the needs of their children. Importantly, the program appears

to have enabled parents to provide positive support to their children through the post-separation process.

Normalization of separation appears to be insufficiently acknowledged as a protective factor toward the facilitation of post-separation adjustment during what can be an unfamiliar and highly emotive process for many individuals. In other words, making sense of their newfound situation may help as a first step in adjusting to separation. Schramm and Becher (2020) identified that normalization of separation is an advantage of face-to-face post-separation programs, but what remains less clear is why normalization is helpful. Results from this study suggest that normalization helps participants understand that their issues are not unique and that discussing them with peers is helpful. This is important because normalization may help reduce feelings of shame and improve well-being during the critical early phase of separation (Treloar, 2019). It is critical to improve parents' well-being during this initial phase of separation to help build resilience that will likely be required when encountering potential hurdles associated with courts, co-parenting, and their children.

Discussion with peers was sometimes noted as more important than the content of modules in this study. Having the program is potentially as important as what is being taught in the program. Elements such as program targets, content, length, and dosage are commonly the focus of post-separation parenting program reviews (see Schramm & Becher, 2020; Eira Nunes et al., 2021). What is overlooked are the benefits that arise from the interaction and group dynamics that occur within these programs. Listening to other participants who have encountered and overcome similar issues contributed to the normalization of separation and provided hope that these issues were not insurmountable. As participants realized that their peers had experienced similar issues and overcame them, it appeared to instill hope that their individual issues could be resolved. The perception of hope is valuable to support adjustment and personal growth (Cox et al., 2021; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). Thus, instilling hope by normalizing separation in the early stages of separation may help motivate the individual to adjust during this critical stage of adjustment.

Behavioral changes implemented by participants during the early stages after completing the program included shifting attitudes, improving communications, and managing emotions. Results suggest that participants not only learned about potentially detrimental effects of dysregulated emotions but learned strategies and techniques to cope with difficult and unexpected emotions. Besides teaching the effects of separation, it is important for post-separation programs to teach adaptive strategies to manage emotions to implement when necessary (Jewell et al., 2017). These results suggest that the SPARK Program taught participants adaptive strategies (e.g., managing frustration) that in turn helped them to cope emotionally post-separation.

The data indicate that a shift in logic helped participants to manage their emotions, representing a foundational underpinning of the program logic model. The changes reported from this study indicated that the SPARK Program contributed to shifting attitudes during the critical initial stages of post-separation. For some participants, the turning point during their post-separation adjustment was when their children became a focal point. This focus helped participants realize that their post-separation goals also include their children. Yet outcomes of the program logic model centered on self-care were not identified in the results as the program developers anticipated. Therefore, there is a gap between what the program aims to achieve and what is being achieved. This presents as an opportunity for participants' feedback to contribute to program development. Importantly, this demonstrates the value of exploring both participant and the developers' perspectives of the program to guide the program's evolution and meet user's requirements.

Participants realized that for their children to be supported post-separation, they need to shift the focus from themselves and recognize the need to co-parent their children successfully. This attitude shift during the early stages of separation may be an essential change required for successful post-separation adjustment. In addition, the data suggest that a shift towards a more

favorable co-parenting attitude is a key turning point in improved communications with the co-parent. In turn, conflict with the co-parent may be minimized or reduced. Reduced conflict between parents could lead to more effective co-parenting whereby parents can interact and solve problems cordially, which benefits both parents and children (Cronin et al., 2017).

Implications

The current data suggest that the SPARK Program can help individuals with post-separation adjustment. It is critical for individuals to receive information, strategies, and support during the early stages post-separation to help them navigate an often new, stressful, and unfamiliar process.

The findings from this study echo suggestions that post-separation parenting programs are useful for parents who separate and therefore should be offered by organizations that support separated families (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2019). Given that separation is emotional and can be traumatic for parents and their children, it is helpful for individuals to understand that although their experiences are unique, there are similarities with other individual's experiences. These peer experiences provide hope for an improved post-separation future. In addition, attending these programs provides individuals with practical strategies for communicating with the co-parent and managing emotions that may not have been sought otherwise. What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which these strategies contributed to behavioral change or whether participants learned strategies from interacting with each other.

The data from this study suggest that attending, listening, and learning from both facilitators and peers is valued by participants. Facilitators of the SPARK Program focused on psychoeducation in the program and facilitated lively group discussions. The SPARK Program content includes core content, but participants noted that they particularly appreciated the peer aspect of learning—that is, learning and working through issues and problems together to come up with solutions. This may further increase the perception of validation for individuals that discuss their lived experience as other participants appreciate and relate with them. For the individual who receives the advice, the learnings may be held in higher regard because they are informed from lived experience. Thus, current, and future programs could benefit by revisiting and refining core content as outlined by Schramm et al. (2018). Less content and more peer learning may help to consolidate learnings and help parents adjust in the acute phase after separating. These findings and additional results from this data corpus (i.e., SWOT analysis) will be presented to the SPARK Program so that they can look at how to incorporate the feedback into their program.

Limitations

First, the small sample size and qualitative design limits generalizing the findings beyond this group. Second, self-selection bias may have influenced the sample because people may have wanted to participate based on their positive experiences. This may have skewed results toward more positive findings. Third, results may have been influenced by the lower number of males in the study. Therefore, different results may have been found with more male participants who were primary caregivers of their children. Fourth, not all participants completed all modules of the program. Participants who had not completed all modules may have selected the module that was most relevant to them to start with, and may experience fewer positive experiences after completing other modules. Therefore, responses might change after they have completed other modules. Fifth, we did not consider differences between mandated or voluntary participation, educational level, length of time in a relationship with the co-parent, nor custodial

arrangements. All have the potential to influence participants' experiences of the program and/or post-separation adjustment (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Finally, participant perceptions of the facilitators of the program were not assessed, and therefore the variability of impact of different facilitators is unknown.

An alternative interpretation of the current findings is that wounds are healed over time, and attitudes can also change in time without intervention. Previous research indicates that distress associated with separation attenuates during the first 2 years post-separation (Amato, 2010; Halford & Sweeper, 2013). Further understanding about the normalizing of the separation process and how this can help parents work toward a productive co-parenting relationship that focuses on their child's well-being may help clarify the impact of the SPARK Program on participants.

Future research opportunities

Several recommendations are offered for future research. First, further exploration of how the normalization of separation helps parents cope may provide insight about how to strengthen this aspect of post-separation programs, especially within virtual environments given that only in-person attendees were included in this study. Second, future research may benefit from cohorts that are similar in composition (e.g., males who are not primary caregiver) to allow for potentially different impacts influenced by gender- and or caregiver-specific issues. Third, longitudinal study designs could help understand whether the changes reported here are maintained over time and what aspects of the program contribute to changes being maintained. Research could specifically examine how aspects of the program prompt an attitude change, for example. Fourth, differences between mandatory and voluntary participation, educational levels, co-parent relationship time period, and custodial arrangements should be considered in future research. Fifth, exploration of participant perceptions on different facilitator characteristics and behaviors that were helpful and less helpful may help to improve future facilitator training.

Conclusion

Understanding how a post-separation parenting program can help separated parents adjust during the early stages of the post-separation process is critical for program development and delivery. Strategies for emotion regulation and effective communication continue to be important elements of post-separation programs. Group discussions that helped to normalize separation may be a protective factor during this challenging life event and therefore warrant further consideration in post-separation parenting programs. Greater understanding of the normalization of separation may be particularly helpful for theoretical advancement and program effectiveness when aiming to help individuals adjust post-separation.

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