



Hasaan Munim
Research Assistant
Austin 009
1515 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 496-0917
melissagayton@college.harvard.edu

To: Jim Greiner
From: Hasaan Munim
RE: Brittany N. Rudd et al., *Randomized control trial: Online parent program and waiting period for unmarried parents in Title IV-D court*, 29 J Fam Psychol 679 (2015).
Date: August 15, 2018

Title: Randomized control trial: Online parent program and waiting period for unmarried parents in Title IV-D court

Authors: Brittany N. Rudd, Amy Holtzworth-Munroe, Jason G. Reyome, Amy G. Applegate, and Brian M. D’Onofrio

Location: Marion County Circuit Court, Marion County, IN

Sample: 182 cases

Timeline: N/A

Target group: Unmarried parents

Intervention type: Online Parent Program and Waiting Period

Research papers: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26075738>

Partners: Indiana University, National Science Foundation, Indiana Supreme Court

Abstract

Parental conflict was harmful for children. To mitigate parental conflict following interaction with Title IV-D courts, researchers tested the effects of an online education program and the timing of court hearings following the legal establishment of paternity. The study found that parents are less likely to come to full agreement on child-related issues following a waiting period; parental negotiations immediately following establishment of paternity are preferable.

I. Policy Issue

Parental conflict produced negative outcomes for children in the domains of school achievement, conduct, and mental health. On average, unmarried parents experienced more interaction with the justice system, particularly via paternity lawsuits, than even parents undergoing divorce. Children born to unmarried parents represented about 41 percent of births in 2012. It was important to examine the effectiveness of conflict-reducing interventions due to the long-term consequences of parental conflict, including

increased litigation and nonpayment of child support. How did waiting periods and an online education program impact paternity litigation?

II. Context of Evaluation

The study focused on the Marion County Vicruit Court's Title IV-D Division in Indianapolis, IN. Title IV-D of the Social Security Act requires parents to establish paternity before the residential parent may receive government benefits. Parents may establish paternity through mutual agreement or court action, which may involve genetic testing. In the county where this study took place, Marion County, IN, 14 percent of Title IV-D cases involve contested paternity and necessitate court adjudication. Given the economic need of claimants, an unfavorable court decision was a significant risk. Furthermore, families that engage in adversarial proceedings to establish paternity likely faced substantial parental conflict.

III. Details

The study sought to understand the ability of two interventions to prevent parental conflict and adversarial proceedings after the court established paternity: an online parent education program and a waiting period. Using a 2x2 randomized control trial, the study used an intent-to-treat framework to randomize before obtaining the consent of the participants. A 2x2 design tested two treatments by using various combinations of the treatments. In this study, the combinations were as follows: (1) no participation in ProudToParent and immediate hearing, (2) participation in ProudToParent and immediate hearing, (3) no participation in ProudToParent and waiting period, and (4) participation in ProudToParent and waiting period.

The online parental education program, ProudToParent, was an informational and inspirational program that asked parents to make commitments to reducing parental conflict and shielding children from such conflict. Although previous research indicated the efficacy of in-person parent education programs for separating couples, there was a lack of empirical evidence supporting online parent education. However, there was interest in online parent education because it was potentially cheaper and more accessible. Completing ProudToParent only took a half hour and depending on randomization condition was completed in the court or at home.

The second treatment condition involved providing parents a few weeks (an average of 21.9 days) after the court established paternity before their court hearing to resolve child-related legal issues. The researchers posited that the waiting period may attenuate the stress associated with the court establishing paternity, thereby making an agreement in court more likely.

After completing the study, court interns completed a form detailing seven short-term outcomes of the hearing, "legal custody, physical custody, parenting time, child support, arrearage (i.e., retroactively ordered child support payments), child's last name, and tax exemptions."

IV. Results and Policy Lessons

The study's sole outcome variable was whether litigation parties reached full agreement on all seven aforementioned issues, a 0-1 outcome.

The primary statistically significant finding was that, in the ProudToParent condition, parents without a waiting period came to an agreement in 88 percent of cases and with a waiting period came to an agreement in 45 percent of cases ($p < 0.001$). This means that parents assigned to the waiting period condition and asked to complete ProudToParent were 89% less likely to reach a full agreement versus those asked to complete the program on the same day as their hearing. Furthermore, parents in the waiting period condition assigned to complete the ProudToParent program at home were less likely to appear for their hearing in the first place (36 percent failure to appear vs. 7 percent) (95 percent CI [1.84, 29.29]).

The findings suggested that Title IV-D courts ought to immediately initiate negotiations for parents to come to an agreement after establishing paternity. The online program did not demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in full agreements, leading the authors to suggest that a more intensive program may facilitate skill-building for parents.

V. Quality of the Study

Missing data and the statistical insignificance of the main trends studied limited the article's ability to answer its research question. For example, participants in the ProudToParent and waiting period condition observed a greater, statistically significant level of attrition versus other study conditions. The Indiana Supreme Court stipulated that the researchers refrain from asking participants why they opted out of the study – such missing data may have led to bias. Furthermore, because the study only observed only short-term trends, longer term outcomes remained unanswered, such as parental conflict and social support for parents.