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Deborah Druar
(The Hampshire County Bar
Association, Northampton, MA),
An Expression of Deep Concern:
Championing the Needs of Never
Married Couples and Their Children
Coping with Family Related
Litigation and Separation

ABSTRACT

The National Center for Health Statistics has estimated that in 2010, 40.8 percent of births will be to never-married parents (Child Trends Data Bank, 2012). A never married parent who files a complaint at the Probate and Family Court in Hampshire County, Massachusetts seeking to establish paternity, custody, visitation or financial support is *mandated* to attend the For The Children© (FTC©) parent education program. This qualitative, exploratory, retrospective study, done in collaboration with the Hampshire County Bar Association, explored whether the unique needs of never-married couples with children engaged in family related litigation are met in the curriculum of the current parenting education program (For the Children) and whether additional skills or information would be helpful.

Given the lack of research regarding never-married parents attending parent education programs, a phenomenological approach was used. Five never-married parents who attended the FTC© parenting program participated in recorded telephone interviews. Subjective responses were elicited regarding participants feelings and experiences about the following: a) relationship with their co-parent, b) the workability of the parenting plan, c) conflict in their co-parenting relationship, d) their relationship with their child, e) the effects of the court process and f) the effects of the FTC© parenting program.

A thematic analysis of participant responses showed that the majority of subjects agreed that the FTC© Parenting Program generally met their unique needs. The results of this small study and the increasing numbers of never-married couples having children suggest that future research is required and supportive policy is necessary.

**AN EXPRESSION OF DEEP CONCERN: CHAMPIONING THE NEEDS OF NEVER
MARRIED COUPLES AND THEIR CHILDREN COPING WITH FAMILY RELATED
LITIGATION AND SEPARATION**

A project in collaboration with the Hampshire
County Bar Association, Northampton,
Massachusetts, submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Social
Work.

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2012

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I dedicate this thesis to:

~ my father, Chief Master Sergeant Alfred G. Fagan, an artist, veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars, and although no longer of this world, a man who exemplified an ardent commitment to kind and ethical awareness of all human and animal life. "Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity." ~ Buddha

~ my adult children, N., J., and K. who unknowingly signed up to be mom to themselves, each other and the family menagerie Keisha, Pixie and Sasha. "Life works because not everyone in your tribe is nuts on the same day." ~ Anne Lamotte

~ my husband and life partner Michael. You never waver in your love, patience and belief in me. You make life, come to life. You are the yang to my yin. "Yang is will and yin is wisdom, and one without the other is neither, and together they are joy." ~ Joudry and Pressman

"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." ~ Audre Lorde

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW	6
III METHODOLOGY	31
IV FINDINGS	39
V DISCUSSION.....	53
REFERENCES	61
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Recruitment Letter.....	65
Appendix B: Informed Consent	66
Appendix C: Interview Screening Form	68
Appendix D: Human Subject Review Board Approval	69
Appendix E: Interview Guide	70
Appendix F: Referral Sources	73
Appendix G: Hampshire County Bar Association Letter	75
Appendix H: Transcriber Confidentiality Letter.....	76

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Whether described as changing or evolving, the structure of the family in 2012 looks very different than it did 40 years ago. Between 1963 and 2004, a 30% increase occurred in the number of children born to unmarried couples (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2011, p. 4). The National Center for Health Statistics has estimated that in 2010, 40.8 percent of births will be to never-married parents (Child Trends Data Bank, 2012). The gold star of research on never married parents belongs to the Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study (FFCWBS) the findings of which suggests that the relationships of never married parents are fraught with instability and the families they create are fragile at best (Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study, 2011). Over 60 percent of never married parents have dissolved their relationship within five years of a child's birth (McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

A never married parent who files a complaint at the Probate and Family Court in Hampshire County, Massachusetts seeking to establish paternity, custody, visitation or financial support is *mandated* to attend the For The Children© (FTC©) parent education program. For almost seven years this parent education program, the only mandated parenting program of its kind in the United States, has as its sole purpose supported the specific needs of never married parents as they dissolve their relationships and prepare to co-parent. This study, done in collaboration with the HCBA, solicited the perspective of five past FTC© participants and asked, “Are the unique needs of never-married couples with children engaged in family related

litigation met in the curriculum of the current parenting education program and what additional skills or information would be helpful?”

The glut of research conducted on co-parenting after a couple dissolves their relationship examined married couples who divorce. Popular opinion and the previous research agree that divorce has a potentially negative mental and emotional impact on the children involved (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011). It is estimated the indirect costs of divorce in the United States are “...roughly \$33 billion annually” (Schramm, 2006, p. 146). Educational programming implemented by the Family Courts to help couples cope effectively with the transition to divorced status, has “nearly tripled from 541 [programs] in 1994 to 1,516 in 1998” (Cookston, Braver, Sandler and Genalo, p. 190, 2002). The completion of a parenting education curriculum designed to assist families in coping with the process and outcome of divorce is required of divorcing couples in eleven states (Cookston, et al., 2002). What is available to never married parents who separate?

In 2006 the Probate and Family Courts in Massachusetts received 19,510 paternity complaints (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2011). Of those paternity complaints, 243 were filed in Hampshire County. In response:

Massachusetts Probate and Family Court Chief Justice Sean M. Dunphy responded to the needs of this growing population by enacting Standing Order 2-05. The Standing Order states that “this Court finds that the interests of minor children of never-married parents appearing before it would be well served by educating parents about children’s emotional needs and the effects of family related litigation on child behavior and development.” Standing Order 2-05 provides that in the Hampshire Division of the Probate and Family Court

Department, all parties to a Complaint to Establish Paternity, a Complaint for Custody/Support/Visitation, a Complaint for Modification or Contempt in any case involving visitation, custody of support of never-married parents filed on or after September 1, 2005 shall attend and participate in a three (3) hour education program known as “For The Children”. (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2011, p.5)

The For the Children (FTC) parenting education program supports the specific needs of never married couples and their children involved in family litigation. Never married parents turn to the courts to make decisions regarding custody, the details of parenting, and financial support. Ideally, never married parents who enter court proceedings have a sense of what and how these decisions impact their children. However, many may not. The FTC© curriculum focuses on the “importance of involvement by both parents, what children need from their parents and the development of conflict resolution skills” (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2011, p.5).

Cooperative parenting or *co-parenting* as referred to in the FTC© curriculum focuses on enhancing a couple’s ability to work in unison to raise their common child. Carlson and Hognas (2010) identify the co-parenting relationship as “a unique construct distinct from both couple relationship quality and parenting behavior” (p. 2). “The research shows that regardless of socio-economic status, children have a better chance at healthy development and overall success in life if two parent figures are present” (McDonnell, 2009, p. 2).

If we assume that 1) relationships are complex 2) parenting is difficult and 3) that children deserve positive parenting, then supporting parents, no matter the status of their relationship, must be a priority. Parents will not always cohabitate. Acknowledgment of the shift in family structure that children are born into, especially when the primary relationship dissolves

underlies the creation of the FTC© parenting program. There is a gap in the literature regarding parent education programs specifically developed for never married parents who separate.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the impact completing the FTC© parenting program has on participants' co-parenting relationship, workability of their individual parenting plan, ability to manage inter-parental conflict, relationship with their child, and finally, feelings on how and if the program met their needs. Both mothers and fathers who completed the FTC program were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that elicited narrative responses about their perceptions regarding the effects of the curriculum on their relationship and their relationship with their child.

Society can no longer refuse to accept and recognize alternative family structures as they are no longer alternative. For as long as the institution of marriage survives, there will be divorce. Never married parents will separate, take different partners, and give birth to more children. As children grow up they will experience multiple transitions in family structure. Tremendous mental and emotional pain will result as the forces of change crack society's foundational belief that a two parent family is the only acceptable family form. Family forms will continue to evolve.

Professional social workers are ethically bound to “seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the wellbeing of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities” (Code of Ethics, National Association of Social Workers, 2008, p. 4). This study aims to provide insight into how the For the Children© parenting program supports never-married parents and their children. Clinical social workers who treat families, individual adults, and children or who work within the court system will benefit from this knowledge.

Additionally, this study hopes to initiate conversation between social work professionals, Family Court personnel, and policy makers. Ideally, these conversations will result in encouraging Family Courts nationwide to consider mandating the For The Children© parenting program for all never married parents.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature in regard to the rapidly increasing family form of never-married couples with children. Literature that addresses the legal, emotional, and consequential results experienced by never married parents as they legally dissolve their relationship is practically non-existent. Divorcing parents are able to rely on a socially acceptable, well traveled, prescribed road as they navigate the separation and end of their legal marriage and prepare for the concerns around child custody. There is no paved road for the never-married. Preliminary estimates by the National Center for Health Statistics state that 40.8 percent of all births in 2010 were to never-married mothers (Child Trends, 2012). Osborne, Manning and Smoc (2005) found in their study of the instability in cohabitating families that "...children born to cohabiting versus married parents have over four times the odds of experiencing their parents' separation by age 3" (Abstract, para. 1). For the purpose of this study the terms *unmarried* and *never-married* will have the same meaning when describing parents.

Existing literature paints a negative statistical picture of the quality and longevity of the never-married couple with children's relationship (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). The title of the largest national survey/study to date designed and implemented by researchers from Princeton and Columbia Universities describes what most research of never married parents confirms. Never married parents often create fragile families, fragile because as a family they likely live in poverty, and are more at risk of breaking up (Parke, 2004, p. 1). The Fragile Families and Child

Well Being Study (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Waller, 1999) is the first quantitative, national, longitudinal, study of never-married parents and the comprehensive, baseline source for researchers interested in studying this population. The FFCWBS followed a contingent of almost 5000 children in 20 cities across the U.S. born between 1998 and 2000. Three quarters of these parents were classified as never-married at the time of the child's birth. Of the almost 5000 births, 3,712 were born to never-married couples and 1,186 were born to married parents (Center for Law and Social Policy, Brief, 2004, p. 3).

The majority of current literature examining parental relationship dissolution focuses on the divorced couple. As knowledge increases in regard to the negative effects of divorce on children, family courts have rallied to create voluntary or mandated "divorcing parents education programs (DPEs)" (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011, p. 107) designed to help parents support their children through the divorce process. Pollet and Lombreglia in their 2008 survey found that 46 states have court associated DPEs. Thirty-eight of those states mandate participation in these programs, others only encourage parents to attend. To date, there exists not one piece of literature related to parent education programs for never-married parents seeking to dissolve their relationship.

For the Children© (FTC©), the mandated parent education program implemented by the Hampshire County Bar Association (Commonwealth of Massachusetts) for all never married parents who engage in family related litigation, in the Hampshire County Division of Probate and Family Court, attempts to address concerns specific to never married parents. The creators of this program, pioneers by definition, are the first to champion the needs of never-married parents as they seek to dissolve their relationship and attempt to remain committed to the children they share as parents. The focus of this study is a preliminary evaluation of the FTC curriculum

asking the question: “Are the unique educational needs of never-married couples with children engaged in family related litigation met in the curriculum of the current parenting education program and what additional skills or information would be helpful?”

The first section of this literature review will address current literature around the growing family form of never-married parents and will include demographic and statistical trends of never-married parents and the families they create and dissolve. This section also locates same sex parents in the discussion. The second section will define co-parenting and explore research describing how both the never-married father and mother view the co-parenting relationship. The third section will highlight the FTC© parenting education program’s mission, curriculum, relationship to the literature and potential impact on the future. The final section evaluates the policy and funding provided by the federal government as a response to the growing number of never married couples having children.

Who Are the Never Married Parents?

Why describe these families as fragile?

Forty years ago with only about 10% of births (Fragile Families and Child Well Being Fact Sheet, 2010, p. 3) occurring outside of marriage, the term *unmarried* or *never married* parent did not exist in our language of relationships. The term, *unwed mother*, described an unmarried pregnant woman. The “guy who knocked her up” referred to the biological father. The mother might live elsewhere until the birth of her child and the father likely never publicly acknowledged paternity. If a marriage occurred, the colloquial description was a *shotgun marriage*.

Now, fast forward to the 21st century where nearly one third of all children are born to never married couples (Parke, 2004, p. 1). Results of the FFCWB survey show that unmarried

parents do not consider the birth of their children as any sort of social stigma, contradicting the historical stereotype of unwed mother, deadbeat dad, and illegitimate child (England & Edin, 2007).

At the onset, the FFCWBS found that one half of unmarried parents were living together (cohabitating) at the time of their first child's birth, another 32% were romantically involved but living separately, 8% were friends and the remaining 10% had little or no contact (Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Fact Sheet, 2010). Findings from this study provide a picture of unmarried parents as far more disadvantaged than married parents. The FFCWBS found that Compared to married parents, unmarried parents were:

- more likely to have started parenting in their teens.
- less likely to have lived with both biological parents growing up.
- more likely to have had children with other partners.
- more likely to be poor.
- more likely to suffer from depression.
- more likely to report substance abuse.
- more likely to have spent time in jail.
- disproportionately African American and Hispanic. (Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study Fact Sheet, 2011, p. 1)

These families are two times more likely to live below the poverty line, with 43% of mothers and 8% of fathers receiving some form of public assistance. Mothers and fathers are typically in their 20's and about 43% or less has not finished high school. The "about" page of the FFCWBS website explains, "We refer to never-married parents and their children as 'fragile families' to underscore that they are families and that they are at greater risk of breaking up and

living in poverty than more traditional families” (Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study, 2011, p. 1). The statistics reflect and confirm the term, *fragile families*.

The FFCWB is the primary data resource for the majority of research written on never married parents. This literature review will not examine all research derived from the FFCWB, only that which is related to the research question. One significant limitation of the FFCWB study results, in terms of this study, is the non-inclusion of unmarried parents living in rural or suburban areas (Parke, 2004) as well as same sex unmarried parents. This omission calls into question generalizing the resulting data to all unmarried parents.

The population of this current study includes never-married parents living in rural and small town areas, a population not yet surveyed. When confirming the demographics of the FFCWB survey study’s fathers, researchers relied solely on the mothers as primary reporters (Parke, 2004). This qualitative study attempts to equally sample and thus represent the responses of both never-married mothers and fathers. It should be noted, however, that one mother and one father are not the only labels associated with the creation of a non-marital family. Same sex parents, grandparents as parents, and various other adults create families that include biologically and non-biologically related children, with relationships that may then dissolve.

It was expected that same sex never married parents would be participants in this study. No same sex never-married parents met the study criteria of having completed the only mandated parenting education program in the domestic United States between August 2010 and March 2012. The FTC© parenting program is situated in Massachusetts where gay and lesbian couples have the right to marry. If they have children, choose not to marry, and then dissolve their relationship they are, in fact, never-married parents. The implications of this study and its potential scope of influence extends nationwide to include states that do not allow same sex

parents the right to civil marriage. Therefore I will present existing literature around same sex never married parents.

Same sex parents are ducks too

GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders), NCLR (The National Center for Lesbian Right's) and NCLR's National Family Law Advisory Council collaborated in 2011 to revise the guide, *Standards for LGTB Families*, originally written in 2009 (Bonauto, 2011). The guide, updated in 2011 states:

We believe (as with ducks) that if it looks like a family, if it holds itself out as a family, and if it functions like a family, then it is a family. But this position may not be respected in all states, so please do what you can to protect your children and your family now. (Bonauto, 2011, p. 6)

Same sex parents do not exist as part of the FFCWB study. Yet currently, 42 states do not allow same sex couples to legally marry (ProCon, 2012). In these states, if they have children, same sex parents are by definition never-married parents. As with heteronormative never married parents, negotiating the dissolution of their relationship and tending to the legal needs of their family is a lonely and empty road. Same sex parents endure an even more complicated process in negotiating the breakup of their family, as their children may have been adopted by one or both partners, born of a previous heteronormative marriage, a surrogacy, or sperm donation. Depending on the state in which they reside, local laws may have a negative impact on their navigation of the process of establishing legal parental rights. Heteronormative parents have DNA to prove paternity giving them the initial legal right to co-parent.

Baumle and Compton (2011) state, "The odds of having a child present in the household are higher for lesbian households compared to gay male households. The odds of a child being

present are also higher for racial and ethnic minorities compared to their white counterparts” (p. 89). Baumle and Compton (2011) also found, “On average, across all states and the District of Columbia, 18.32 percent of same-sex partners have children in their households, ranging from 6.04 percent in the District of Columbia to 31.82 percent in South Dakota” (p. 94). If and when these relationships dissolve, they resemble the participants and focus of this study, as they too, may be of a racial and ethnic minority, earn less, be less educated, and of all racial and ethnic minorities are most often African American and/or Hispanic.

It is disturbing to discover that there continues to be a dearth of literature on same sex never married parents and their children. A cursory search of a major psychological database using the words same sex parents’ elicited thirty-five articles, 20 were published prior to 1990. When the descriptor, *gay parents*, was used, thirteen articles emerged and most titles included references to law and policy. Same sex parents have navigated the breakup of their families long before the FFCWB survey existed and before researchers began to take notice of the heteronormative population of never married parents. As same sex never-married parents are invisible in the literature this researcher has chosen to present the available literature.

Public policy often drives research and, at times, research drives public policy whether validated or not (Patterson, 2009). Creation of public policy often relies on sorting individuals into a few categories (Patterson, 2009). Prior to the FFCWB survey, never married parents and their children were not distinguished from the larger group of married parents who co-parent, dissolve their relationship, and move on. Currently, never married same sex parents are part of research designated to investigate heteronormative never married parents. Their inclusion in this literature review is a small, yet important step toward recognizing the needs of same sex never

married parents who dissolve their relationship, and want to continue to co-parent, as potentially unique from those of their heteronormative counterparts.

Proving paternity, requesting the right to co-parent, forming a parenting plan, demanding economic support or sadly, the formal denial of any level of interest or contact requires filing a complaint with the family and probate court. The online dictionary.com definition of the word, *parent*, lists first, “a father or a mother” and fourth, “a protector or guardian” (dictionary.reference.com, 2012) while Merriam Webster’s online dictionary states first, “one that begets or brings forth offspring....a person who brings up and cares for another” (Merriam Webster online dictionary, 2012). For the purposes of this study, a definition of co-parenting and an understanding of how parents view their co-parenting relationship is imperative in understanding how never-married parents, no longer romantically involved, move forward as parents.

What is Co-parenting?

The concept of positive co-parenting is a major focus in the curriculum of the FTC© parent education program for never married parents. The co-parenting relationship must continue to exist outside and separate from whatever the romantic status of the couple. Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn (2008) define a high quality *co-parenting relationship* as “... one in which the parents agree about how their child should be raised, cooperate in carrying out shared objectives, and demonstrate mutual support and commitment in rearing their common child” (p. 461). Carlson and Hognas (2010) identify the co-parenting relationship as “a unique construct distinct from both couple relationship quality and parenting behavior” (p. 2). Carlson and Hognas (2010) differentiate parallel parenting from co-parenting stating that *parallel parenting* is maintaining individual parent-child relationships separate from the other parent,

whereas co-parenting demands parents interact cooperatively (at the very least) to coordinate and collaborate on child care (Kamp Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010).

Among parents who cohabit, or are divorced, a co-parenting relationship that is low in conflict and cooperative in nature directly affects child outcomes (Carlson, McLanahan & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Cooper, Beck, and Hognas (2011) state that, “gaining a better understanding of the predictors of co-parenting among fragile families can inform efforts to promote positive parenting and child development within this family context” (p.5). Not yet fully understood is co-parenting among never married parents who remain cohabitating. What happens to co-parenting when parents dissolve their romantic relationship? As previously stated, there exists no societal road map for never married parents as they dissolve their relationship.

Even more pertinent to this idea is that, “Fatherhood roles outside of co-residential relationships do not have fully institutionalized norms that mother and father can follow to make routine involvement easier” (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010, p. 183). Further, Cherlin as cited in Tach, Mincy, and Edin (2010), refers to behavior in co-residential relationships as “automatic” (p. 183), in nature, where daily issues have commonly relied upon solutions not tailor made for the never married parent predicament. Though minute in scope, there exists some literature that looks at factors that influence co-parenting among never married parents.

What Factors Influence Co-parenting among the Never Married?

Fathers’ perspectives.

Fathers’ perspectives are notably absent in the meager amount of literature that explores co-parenting in non-cohabitating, never married parents (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010). Studies that examined father’s perceptions of the co-parenting relationship have “...relied on the mother’s perspectives [as report of the father’s perspective]” (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010,

p. 59). Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) found, “The bulk of prior research on co-parenting has focused on two-parent families with resident fathers or on divorced couples using small samples of White middle class families” (p. 32).

In one of the few studies addressing the views of the father, Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) focused on determining non-resident, never married fathers’ perceptions of a supportive co-parenting relationship thirty-six months after the birth of their child. The authors found the following factors created the perception of a supportive co-parenting relationship for fathers: “...if they had a a higher income (p. 55)”, “...when they have higher levels of education” (p. 55), “...when mothers are employed” (p. 56), when the child is male (p.56), more frequent father-child contact and involvement (p. 57), and when fathers provide informal support (p. 37). Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) also found the following factors contributed to perceptions of a less supportive co-parenting relationship: fathers with a “history of incarceration” (p. 60), “fathers who have a greater number of children” (p. 5), with mothers, “lower education level” (p.56), of the mother, and new partners for either the mother or father.

Tach, Mincy and Edin (2010) utilize FFCWB data to determine if a father’s relationship with his child is contingent upon his relationship with the child’s mother. The authors suggest that relationship instability among never married parents creates a decline in father/child involvement and that multiple-partner fertility, where parents moving into relationships with new partners and new parenting roles, added substantial barriers to involvement. The chances of a non-marital child having a relationship and consistent involvement with their father by the time they are an adolescent is twenty percent (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010). This is despite results of the FFCWB study where almost all fathers interviewed stated that they intended to remain involved with their children (Tach, et al., 2010). If co-parents have no understanding of their

individual and the other parent's role in their child's life after a break up, it is more likely that the father will disengage from their former partner (Cooper, Beck, & Hognas, 2011).

Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) present valuable and pertinent implications that support the rationale for the current study. First, the authors state that programs designed to improve co-parenting must include fathers so that, with mothers, they are encouraged to work as a team. The FTC © parenting program is designed and mandated for both partners. Secondly, the authors state, "Our results suggest that the processes involved in nonresidential co-parenting though not necessarily unique may require different strategies from those used to address co-parenting in two-parent nuclear families and divorced families" (p. 60). Thirdly, Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) suggest, "...interventions targeted at providing parenting and family education to both mothers and fathers may better help parents to work as a team" (p. 60). The authors summarize, "Programs that address problem solving, the expectations that each parent has of being a co-parent, working together while interacting with the child, and communicating with partners and defining parental roles may help enhance co-parenting for unmarried, non-resident couples" (p.60).

Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn (2008) suggest, "... that about three-fifths of children born outside of marriage will experience parenting by a custodial mother and nonresident father by around age 5 [five]" (p.479). The authors investigated how often a father remained involved in his child's life after a non-marital birth and if cooperative co-parenting influenced that involvement. Carlson et al. (2008) noted that it is "disquieting" (p. 480) that despite more and more research showing father involvement providing benefits to child outcomes, an increasingly large number of "... five-year-old children born outside of marriage have no regular contact with their nonresident biological father" (p. 480) Carlson et al. (2008)

specifically analyzed “...whether co-parenting affects fathers’ involvement and whether fathers’ involvement also influences co-parenting” (p. 481), as they assert that both powerful constructs, co-parenting and father’s involvement, vary over time. “We find strong evidence for effects going from co-parenting to fathers’ involvement and only weak evidence for effects going in the opposite direction” (p. 481)

As previously stated, mothers’ reports about fathers’ behaviors are utilized in the reviewed research more often than reports directly from fathers. Limitations to the research of Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn (2008) include the use of mothers’ reports of fathers’ behaviors, stating, “... the extent of their knowledge is likely correlated with the degree of cooperative co-parenting” (p. 481); any interpretation of the resulting data must be tempered by acknowledging that some observed variables effecting co-parenting and father involvement changed over the time of the study; and there was no accounting for the reciprocal relationship between co-parenting and father involvement. Carlson et al. (2008) concluded that in relation to current policy, programming efforts geared towards marriage promotion might consider helping the couple “strengthen their ability to work together in rearing their child” (p. 482), and that this “could enhance childrearing for all parents whether living in the same households or separate households” (p. 482) This current study hopes to show that the FTC© parenting program teaches and supports the aforementioned considerations.

Mothers’ perceptions.

Laakso (2004) interviewed 43 mothers of “diverse educational and ethnic backgrounds” (p. 136), 29 who had never married and of those, three who had children with two different fathers. Laakso (2004) reviewed the subjective opinions of mothers on the behaviors of 46 fathers in relation to what influenced their decision making in regard to visitation. Seventy-five

percent of those fathers paying child support saw their child regularly. The term, *visitation*, used less frequently in current research, reflects the more contemporary term of co-parenting. Contact with both parents, especially a mother's encouraging the father's contact and involvement with their child are primary components in the FTC© parenting program curriculum.

Concerns about the father's behaviors, their child's expressed desire to see their father, and the mother's relationship with her own father if she came from a mother led family, are the three themes Laakso (2004) reported as factors influencing mother's decisions about their child's contact with their father. "The quality of the relationship did not generally affect visitation decisions since the mothers interviewed felt they should not use the father-child relationship as a weapon" (Laakso, 2004, p. 137)

The mothers in Laakso's (2004) study saw value in the father-child relationship and were more concerned with the fathers' behaviors while with their child. The FTC© parenting program asks participants about what they remember about their relationship with their own parents in regard to how their needs were met as children. If parents reflect on what they felt they did or did not receive when they were children it may positively influence their recognition of and effort toward meeting their own child's needs.

Laakso (2004) determined that the greater concerns for moms had to do with behaviors exhibited by fathers when spending time with their children. These behaviors included smoking, dating behavior, having guns in the house, seat belt use, discipline differences, substance use and abuse, inconsistent contact, and fathers making unfulfilled promises to their children (Laakso, 2004). Although subjective, reports by these mothers none the less influence their decision to allow visitation, even though researchers did not observe the behaviors (Laakso 2004). In conclusion Laakso (2004) stated, "...it is critical that efforts be made to bring parents together

around issues pertaining to their children” (p. 143). Laakso recommended, “... funding fathering programs that teach parenting skills, making both parents more confident in their parenting abilities” (p. 143)

Cooper, Beck and Hognas (2011) suggest that instability may be a source of co-parenting conflict. The authors state, “... mothers who undergo multiple partnership transitions likely differ from those in stable relationships in ways that are unobserved, and these differences may be the source of co-parenting conflict” (p. 8) The authors report being unable to, “... rule out the possibility that unmeasured variables are responsible for the observed association between instability and co-parenting” (p. 18) Cooper, Beck and Hognas (2011) conclude that, “... finding ways to help former couples effectively coparent as they establish new relationships may ultimately promote child well-being among an at risk population” (p. 19)

King and Heard (1999) found that for mothers, “...nonresident father visitation is interrelated to levels of satisfaction and conflict but not in a simple or linear way” (p. 393). Participants were divorced and only mothers supplied information. The authors divided participants into groups based on the patterns they presented in regard to “father visitation, mother satisfaction with the visitation, and parental conflict over visitation” (p. 390). Results aligned with the study’s hypothesis in that the most satisfied mothers accounting for eighty-five percent of the group had no conflict with the father and the degree of father contact was high. Fifty-nine percent of mothers were still satisfied if father’s level of contact was high even if there was some conflict (King & Heard, 1999). Mothers who experienced no conflict with fathers, sixty-nine percent, were satisfied even with a low level of contact (King & Heard, 1999). Forty-five percent of mothers were the least satisfied if the fathers’ level of contact was low and conflict existed over the visitation (King & Heard, 1999).

Results reported by King and Heard (1999) are worth noting despite the fact that participants were divorced versus never-married because they examined visitation and levels of conflict, two primary factors the FTC© parenting program curriculum endeavors to address through skill building. The participants of the FTC© program are not divorced, yet at the core of this newer family form are two parents and one child attempting to navigate the ending of a couple's relationship and seeking the ability to co-parent effectively for the well being of their child. The curriculum of the FTC© parenting program addresses the factors perceived as important to mothers and fathers, as they develop the co-parenting relationship.

Policy, Parenting and Misplaced Millions?

Is existing policy social engineering or support?

The existing policy pertaining to never-married parents swirls with the precise intent of promoting marriage. Nice (2007) noted that the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act provided states tremendous leeway in fulfilling four key objectives, which are:

[to] provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;

[to] end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;

[to] prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies . . . ; and

[to] encourage the formation and maintenance of two parent families. (p. 34)

It is stigmatizing for a never-married parent responsibly pursuing a court decision to legally assure support for their children and themselves, to learn that in 2011 Congress appropriated over \$150 million in grants to fund promoting healthy marriage, and responsible fatherhood. In

other words, reduce the incidence and formation of their family form. Yet, that is exactly what the Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families (HHSACF), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) is advertising. “Sixty Community-Centered Healthy Marriage grants and a National Resource Center for Strategies to Promote Healthy Marriage [grant]” (Casey, K. 2011) were awarded. What message is heard and absorbed by the never-married parents of the FTC© program?

Ribar (as cited in Nice, 2007) states:

Marriage is positively associated with a large number of outcomes including improved cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being for children, better mental and physical health for adults, and greater earnings and consumption for family members. While the associations between marriage and various measures of well being have been convincingly established, they do not, by themselves, make a compelling case that marriage has beneficial effects. As with many other types of social science data, the empirical relationships are likely to be confounded by problems of reverse causality and spurious correlation from omitted variables. Because of this, we cannot be sure whether the observed relationships reflect marriage making people better off, better off people being more likely to marry, or some combination of the two. (Nice, 2007, p. 40, footnote 41)

Randles (2009) asks, “How does policy co-opt and transform ideas about love, family, and interpersonal commitment in the service of a particular political agenda?” (Randles, 2009, p. 11). Shouldn’t public resources support all forms of family? (Randles, 2009). Further

stigmatizing for never married parents with children is the message that the government promotes only one particular relationship status.

Randles' question will not be answered within the current study. However, there are implications for the replication of the FTC© parenting program. Edin and Reed (2005) point out based on their research, "...that public campaigns to convince poor Americans of the value of marriage are preaching to the choir. Instead, campaigns should emphasize the benefits for children of living with both biological parents and stress the harmful effects for children of high-conflict parental relationships" (p. 117).

Adler-Baeder and Shirer (2010) "examined the development and implementation of co-parenting programs for unmarried parents" (p.1) and "...summarizes [sic] critical elements for curriculum content and program design for those serving the broad spectrum of fragile families", stating that "treatment effects were found in key targeted areas, particularly co-parenting behaviors" (p.1). The authors noted that qualitative data from the promotional programs they evaluated reported the following:

Parents consistently noted that they had an enhanced awareness of the importance of healthy co-parenting relationships and father's involvement. They emphasized specific ways in which their co-parenting relationships were more cooperative and respectful and noted their continued commitment to work on the relationship. Mothers often emphasized their commitment to removing barriers to father's involvement. (p.1)

Further, Adler-Baeder and Shirer (2010) suggest that including "co-parenting interventions" (p.1) that focus "... on healthy co-parenting dynamics" (p. 1) would better serve the more capacious population of fragile families and include the "most overlooked co-parents

... who have a young child together, but who may not be romantically linked” (p.1). Citing Phenice, Griffore, Hakoyama, and Silvey (2009), the authors suggest an “ecocultural approach to intervention which suggests forming the intervention to meet the needs of community members in their current context” (p.1).

The FTC© parenting program evolved precisely to address the specific needs of never married parents, “in their current context” (Adler-Baeder & Shirer, 2010, p. 1). Adler-Baeder and Shirer (2010) focus their research on programs that promote marriage among never married parents who form *fragile families*. Their research recognizes the plight of never married parents; identifying them as the most overlooked. Finally, the authors state, “Much more focused and widespread use of these co-parenting interventions - as stand-alone programs or hybrid relationship/co-parenting education - is needed. Intervention researchers can provide an important contribution by focusing efforts on the continued development of distinct programs and research in this area” (p. 1).

In an odd juxtaposition, the FTC© parenting program supports never-married parents in their current environmental context, seeking legal definitions and decisions in an effort to protect and secure their children’s future well being. The mandate of current policy, namely promoting marriage through programs that communicate skills to support and teach healthy dynamic co-parenting, involvement of both parents, mothers encouragement of father involvement, and low levels of conflict and are also the core teachings of the FTC© parenting program. Never married parents who attend the FTC© parenting program will use the skills they learn to benefit future relationships. Granting to programs like the FTC©, a portion of the millions appropriated for marriage promotion programs, would make it possible to sustain and support one program that

supports children of never married parents, who dissolve their relationship, the new relationships their parents may enter, as well as future children born.

The Birthing of FTC©

Why provide a court program for never married parents?.

Townsend (2003) introduces “the several combinations of relationship histories leading to the birth of a child out of wedlock that area seen frequently today in the family court” (p. 355).

The list includes: 1) Children born out of wedlock whose parents have never lived together and never had a relationship, that is, as a result of a one-night stand. 2) Children born out of wedlock whose parents have a sexual relationship but never live together. There may be several children born as a result of the relationship. 3) Children born out of wedlock whose parents live together for a brief time before and after the child’s birth. Often younger parents live with their parents (grandparents of the child) and the child. 4) Children born out of wedlock whose parents have a committed relationship and live together for many years and have several children together. 5) Children born out of wedlock whose parents have a series of relationships with multiple partners. 6) Several children and sets of siblings are conceived in these multiple relationships, which may or may not result in the parties living together as a family. 7) Children born out of wedlock who never live with their biological father but are raised by their mother’s husband or boyfriend. (Townsend, 2003, p. 355)

Not exhaustive by any means, yet the list provides a window into how and why the Hampshire County Bar Association (HCBA) created The FTC© parenting program.

In 2003, Menno, author and Associate Justice of Plymouth Probate and Family Court (Massachusetts), wrote of his experience with paternity cases. Menno (2003) states,

... there is usually a different dynamic that exists in the out-of-wedlock relationship. To not admit this reality is to be dishonest or participate in a thinly veiled attempt at political correctness. My experience as a judge is that many paternity cases involve young people from nonstable relationships that dissolve when the child is very young. This dissolution exposes the serious communication problems between the mother and father. There has not been a history of trust or the ability to resolve disputes, and now the state is imposing the requirements of custody, visitation, and support orders (p.363).

That same year, 2003, Townsend, author and Erie County Family Court Judge wrote that “The sheer numbers alone [of children born out of wedlock] cry out for a revolutionary new way of handling these cases by the courts” (p. 354). Townsend stressed the importance of educating unmarried parents in terms of how best to communicate about their child. This is role the courts were not accustomed to filling. Townsend (2003) states, “The court should direct parent education” (p.357) as one aspect of their responsibility to the children of unmarried parents.

The state of Massachusetts experienced the same nationwide increase of never-married parents coming into the court to determine child paternity and resolve disputes. The 1998 report from the Massachusetts Governor’s Advisory Commission on Responsible Fatherhood and Family Support recommended the creation of a parent education program specifically designed for never-married parents. The Commission advised that the curriculum focus on the issues related to “...access and visitation, child support and child custody” (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2010, p. 4).

The For The Children© parenting program is designed to support this type of family (never-married parents) who are now appearing regularly in court to resolve issues associated

with custody and visitation, now described as a *parenting plan*. The FTC© parenting program was mandated in September of 2005 for never-married parents appearing in the Hampshire County Probate and Family Court (Massachusetts). In 2006 the state of Massachusetts handled "...19,510 paternity complaints filed in the Probate and Family Court" (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2010, p. 4). The same year Hampshire County had 243 paternity complaints filed (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2010).

As an expression of deep concern for the well being of families and children by the Hampshire Division of Probate and Family Courts, and by local lawyers and mental health professionals, the FTC program was developed by Judge Gail Perlman; First Assistant Register Mary-Lynn Carroll; Assistant Judicial Case Manager Beth Crawford; Attorneys Merry Nesser and Oran Kaufman; Psychologist Cynthia Monahan; and Executive Director of HCBA [Hampshire County Bar Association] Rebecca Ryan (Hampshire County Bar Association, 2011, p. 5).

A grant from the Community Fund of Western Massachusetts initially funded the program; the Massachusetts Department of Revenue currently provides funding. Effective co-parenting as previously noted, is linked to higher levels of father involvement, and positive child outcomes. Yet there is a cavernous gap in the literature in regard to the existence, discussion, and efficacy of parenting programs available to address the specific concerns of never married parents and their children.

Curriculum for never-marrieds.

Currently the one and only court mandated parenting education program of its kind in the United States, the FTC© program is facilitated by Mark Nickerson LICSW, and Deborah Roth-

Howe, LICSW who, with Elizabeth Miller-Austin, EdD., developed the curriculum. The program is composed of two, 2 ½ hour evening classes scheduled one week apart. Co-parents do not attend the same sessions and the gender makeup of the class is mixed. The curriculum manual is a seventy page document copyrighted by the HCBA. Divided into two sessions, the curriculum is comprised of twelve units presented in a straightforward manner utilizing brief lectures, open discussion, videos, handouts, and role play by the facilitators. This researcher attended a full session to experience the program first hand.

The facilitators begin the first class by asking parents for the first names and ages of their children in an effort to “symbolically” (HCBA, 2011, p. 37) bring them into the room thereby emphasizing the common thread and purpose of the program. After asking parents to briefly introduce themselves to the person sitting beside them, the facilitators ask participants to maintain an open mind and clarify that it is not possible to “address personal issues in depth” (HCBA, 2011, p. 37). A total of six units are covered in the first evening. The titles of the units communicate the topics covered: “Challenges of Never-Married Parents”, “Importance of Both Parents Involvement”, “What Do You Want for Your Children?”, “The Do’s of Parenting”, “Children’s Needs and Parenting Plans” and finally, “Reflective Listening and Communication Road Blocks” (HCBA, 2011, Table of Contents).

Highlights of the FTC© curriculum in the first evening include affirming the unique needs of never-married parents by brainstorming answers with the group. Emphasis is placed on the statistics showing that a father’s involvement often declines by age two; however, withdrawal can occur with either parent. The intent is to focus on how vital both parents are in the child’s life suggesting that each parent support the others involvement. Privately reflecting on what they valued from their own upbringing, facilitators ask participants to elaborate with the group, “What

do you want your children to receive from each parent?” (HCBA, 2011, p. 22). A review of the “basics of supportive parenting” (HCBA, 2011, p. 24) blends into further discussion regarding the creation of a parenting plan that will need to evolve to meet the changing developmental needs of children. The longest part of the class is a role play between the two facilitators not using and then using the “Reflective Listening Process” (HCBA, 2011, p. 29) and a presentation of the “Ten Road Blocks to Communication” (HCBA, 2011, p. 31).

The facilitators begin the second class by again placing the children’s names back on the wall - symbolically bringing them into the room as a reminder of the purpose of the program. Over the next two and one half hours, facilitators focus entirely on individual parenting, co-parenting, conflict management, and problem solving. The FTC© curriculum states, “In a brief motivational lecture, facilitators draw from any of the following (or other) ‘words of wisdom’ to evoke the value of leaving negative history behind and moving forward with a positive vision” (p. 37).

Examples communicated to participants include,

- When disturbing and traumatic things happen in one's life, it is common for them to remain in people’s minds and repeat themselves in how they respond. It is important to try to move forward and let go of what is over. Otherwise the past continues to be the present.
- Holding on to resentments is like taking poison and hoping it will kill the other person. – Nelson Mandela
- Each day is a new day and the most important day.
- Explain self-fulfilling prophesies. You reap what you sow.

- Whether you are pleased with the condition of your life or not, it is important to take an honest look at it. If it's been bad, assess the damage and move on.
- Be constructive, not destructive. Be proactive, not reactive.

The facilitators end the program by reminding participants of the opportunity to access www.Proud to Parent.org, a free website providing support, guidance, and information to never-married parents.

Summary

A review of the literature about never married parents presents the instability and fragility of this form of family. The Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Waller, 1999) continues to provide data for researchers to utilize for further study. However, there is a dearth of literature addressing the needs of never married parents who enter family courts to dissolve their relationship and/or establish paternity, financial support, or custody/visitation. Parent education programs currently provided for never-married parents are mandated to promote marriage and father responsibility.

The never married parent is a form of family that continues to grow in numbers. It is likely that the number of never married parents who turn to the family court when they dissolve their relationship, asking for assistance in making decisions on custody, visitation, and financial support, will also increase. Divorcing parents are provided supportive programs. The mandated FTC© parenting program is the only one of its kind and despite fifteen years of government funded marriage promotion programs there continues to be a rise in births to never married parents. Ultimately, in the absence of quality co-parenting and connection to both parents the children bear the negative impact.

The current study is an attempt to highlight the unique facets of never married parents and specifically how the FTC© parenting program supports their efforts to coparent and support their children. It is hoped this study will increase awareness among legal professionals' within the nations family courts and policy makers relative to how the FTC© parenting program has identified and seeks to meet the needs of never married parents in family litigation. There is a gap in the literature and a lack of policy and funding for mandated parent education programs serving never married parents trying to learn and understand how to provide the best for their children.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, retrospective study was to explore the effects participating in a mandated parenting education program had on never-married couples with children who engage in family related litigation. The intent of this study was to examine how the For the Children© (FTC) parenting program curriculum contributed to never-married parents' understanding of their actions and the effects of family related litigation on the emotional security, behavior, and development of their children. After reading relevant literature and focusing more narrowly on my research question, I chose to look at the FTC© parenting program through current national policy that deals specifically with never-married parents. The research question was, "Are the unique educational needs of never-married couples with children engaged in family related litigation met in the curriculum of the current parenting education program and what additional skills or information would be helpful?"

The question this study posed involves a certain degree of uncertainty. Since the FTC© parenting program has not been qualitatively examined before, an exploratory study utilizing open-ended, semi-structured interviews to collect data was chosen. This method was intentionally selected in order to "generate tentative possible explanations or insights that can be tested out more carefully later in an explanatory study" (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p. 44). In order to be familiar with the FTC© parenting program curriculum I used an ethnographic aspect of qualitative research by attending one full program session. I was a silent, casual observer of participants as they interacted with the facilitators and responded to the content.

Subjective responses were elicited regarding participants feelings and experiences about the following: a) relationship with their co-parent, b) the workability of the parenting plan, c) conflict in their co-parenting relationship, d) their relationship with their child, e) the effects of the court process and f) the effects of the FTC© parenting program. Interviews were conducted in the spirit of discovery and phenomenological paradigm allowing the emphasis to focus on the real experiences of participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

This research topic is very relevant to the realm of social work. The traditional family structure of decades past has had to adapt and evolve creating alternative forms and definitions of family. This research will guide clinicians to a better understanding of the concerns of clients living within multiple definitions of family and allow for the creation of sensitive and new therapeutic interventions. Many parent educators are also clinical social workers, as is the case in the FTC© parenting program. In addition, this study will provide a resource for the HCBA parent education committee in developing additional programming and groundwork for future research.

Sample

Twelve to fifteen participants were to be recruited from the recipients of a questionnaire that the parenting committee of the Hampshire County Bar Association sent to every participant who completed the FTC© parenting program from September 2010 through August 2011. Eight programs consisting of two 2 ½ hour sessions were conducted between September 2010 and August 2011 with a reported average of 20 participants per class (N=160). The target sample size was 12 to 15 parents.

Included in this survey mailing was a recruitment flyer (Appendix A), that contained information about the study, benefits associated with participation, details related to the purpose

and justification for the study, and an informed consent letter (Appendix B). Potential participants were asked to call my extension at my internship or email me at my Smith address. I returned each call and conducted a brief demographic and screening interview (Appendix C). The questions in the screening interview asked for participant demographic information. The screening interview also provided the opportunity to further explain the nature of the study, enabling me to determine whether the potential participant met the selection criteria for the study. Eligibility requirements included that participants were conversant in English, over 18 years old and who had along with their co-parent completed the FTC© program between September 2010 and August 2011

One participant who was interviewed was an exception in that she was actually a stepmother who had completed the FTC© program voluntarily to benefit her husband's son. This participant was so eager and committed to participate I completed the interview, mailed her the incentive, and did not use her data in the results as she did not meet the criteria for inclusion.

Diversity is important within a research study, and I believe non-heteronormative individuals and family systems are under-researched. However, the facilitators of the FTC© program noted that to their knowledge, only one same sex, never-married couple with children had participated in the program during the time parameters included in this study. This one couple did not agree to participate in the interview.

In collaboration and with permission of the Hampshire County Bar Association (who coordinates registration for the FTC©) seventy-one packets were mailed on February 17 to those participants who met all initial requirements. The HCBA provided a permission letter allowing me to conduct interviews and store materials in their office (Appendix G). The packet contained a written survey, the recruitment flyer for this study, a copy of the informed consent and a self

addressed stamped envelope. As of March 1, eight envelopes were returned as undeliverable, one envelope was returned empty, two completed surveys were returned, and no recipient called or emailed to participate in an interview. In order to increase the sample number, it was necessary to remove the completion requirement for both parents. Participants who completed the program between September 2010 and August 2011 were eligible to participate even if their co-parent had not completed the program.

On March 2nd, with permission from the director of the Hampshire County Bar Association, one hundred additional packets were mailed, this time to those co-parents who were conversant in English, over 18 years old, had completed the program between September 2010 and August 2011 and whose co-parent had not completed the program.

In an effort to increase response I highlighted in yellow the text on the recruitment letter that mentioned the \$25 Visa® Gift Card as an incentive for participation. As of March 11, twenty two completed surveys were returned, seven envelopes were undeliverable as addressed, three were unable to be forwarded, eleven were attempted to deliver and not known, one had an insufficient address, five had a forwarding address sticker but the address had expired and no one called or emailed agreeing to be interviewed.

A concerted effort to recruit was done March 23rd and 24th. I made one hundred and eighty-one phone calls to past participants of the FTC© parenting program. In support of the survey sent by the HCBA, I asked those potential participants who answered my call if they a) had received the packet b) had they had a chance to read through the material c) had any questions and d) had any interested in participating in giving their opinions for a study which included a telephone interview. From these phone calls thirteen people agreed to be interviewed. I confirmed mailing addresses for those that agreed to be interviewed and re-sent the entire

packet to those thirteen possible participants. Included in the packet for the potential interview participants were two copies of the informed consent letter, one of which I had signed for their records. I also re-sent packets to those participants whose packets were returned to the HCBA with a forwarding address sticker. In total I re-sent twenty-four packets.

As of April 5, seven signed informed consents were returned in the stamped self-addressed envelope. I called those seven parents and scheduled telephone interviews at a time convenient for the participant during the week of April 8 and 15. One participant who agreed to interview did not answer the phone when I called at the mutually confirmed time. I called a second time ten minutes later and left a return phone number. This participant did not re-schedule or return the call. Demographics of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Ethics and Safeguards

Risks and Benefits

There were some potential although minimal risks of participating in this study. The questions asked may have triggered some uncomfortable feelings for participants related to their experience in the program, or past or present conflict in regard to their family related litigation. Participants were informed they may find it helpful to discuss any issues that arise because of the interview with a counselor or members of their existing support network. If a participant did feel the need for additional support, a list of national referrals (Appendix F) was included in the mailed packets. The list provided referrals at a national level because the facilitators of the FTC© program were local clinicians and were not comfortable with me providing a local referral list.

Participants received a Visa® gift card for \$25.00 in appreciation for their participation. Participants were not required to answer every question or complete the interview to receive the

gift card. The HCBA requested there be an incentive and covered the entire cost to purchase the six Visa® Gift Cards. There may also have been other benefits to participation. Participants may have benefited from the knowledge that they have contributed valuable information to improve the current FTC© program. The information participants provided about their experiences may also inspire future research and garner commitment and support from other family courts in Massachusetts and across the country to implement programs to meet the needs of never-married parents and their children.

Protection of confidentiality

Confidentiality was protected in a number of ways. Interview tapes were assigned a number and any identifying names and locations were deleted from transcripts. Participants were asked not to use their names while being recorded, and I did not use any identifying information during the recording of the interview. Some illustrative quotes will be used for publication but will be disguised in a way that will protect the privacy of the participant and maintain confidentiality. The tapes and transcripts will be kept for three years, in compliance with federal regulations. During this time, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms will be kept in a locked cabinet. After the three year period has expired, all material will be destroyed or, if kept, will remain in a locked cabinet.

Procedure for withdrawal from the study

Participants had the right to not answer any question during the interview without any repercussions as well as the right to withdraw from the study at any time before, during, or after the completion of the interview up until April 30, 2012. The holding of the data in a locked location protected participants' confidentiality.

Data Collection

The Human Subjects Review Board of the Smith College School for Social Work approved the design of this study (Appendix D). Mark Nickerson LICSW, one of the facilitators of the FTC© parenting program, Judge Gail Perlman (*Retired*), and certified mediator, Attorney at Law, Kathy Townsend LICSW, provided expert review and feedback for my interview guide (see Appendix E). All feedback was incorporated into the final interview guide. Each participant was called at the scheduled time from a private office and the interview was recorded on a digital recorder. Each interview lasted about thirty minutes. A professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix H) transcribed each digital recording.

The interview consisted of a mix of open and closed ended questions to elicit a candid narrative of each participant's experience. I began each interview by reviewing the informed consent and purpose of the study, confirming the answers to the screening questions, reminding participants to be cautious about the use of names, and giving them the opportunity to ask any other questions. The interview questions explored the following areas aligned with the curriculum of the FTC© parenting program: 1) the co-parent relationship 2) workability of the parenting plan 3) conflict in the co-parenting 4) the parent's relationship with their child 5) effects of the court process, and 6) the effects of the FTC© parenting program. Each interview ended with my acknowledgement and appreciation for their contribution, an opportunity to ask any additional questions, and information was exchanged as to when and how they would receive the Visa® Gift Card.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed using an inductive approach allowing the findings to emerge from the raw data (Thomas, 2003). A document was created for each question and raw data from each participant was formatted into

the document. Documents were divided into six folders based on the overall purpose of the questions asked. Dividing the data in this manner made patterns more apparent. Data unrelated to the overall research question was placed in a file to be referred to later as anecdotal information. Data was read in detail twice to develop a familiarity allowing for the identification of major themes. Quotes representing each theme were culled from the raw data and presented in the findings.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Introduction

This chapter contains the findings of five interviews conducted with never-married parents who were past participants of the For the Children© parenting education program. Interview questions were designed to explore participants experience attending the program. “Are the unique educational needs of never-married couples with children engaged in family related litigation met in the curriculum of the current parenting education program and what additional skills or information would be helpful?”

One major finding that emerged was that all participants interviewed considered the positive thing about their relationship with their co-parent to be that they make the effort to effectively communicate if it concerns the wellbeing of their child. Another finding was that responses were mixed in terms of whether the parenting plan was working for them. However, in all cases they felt the parenting plan was working for their child. The third major finding had to do with specific communication skills used to get along with their co-parent. All respondents stated they 1) speak respectfully, 2) are specific when discussing a subject and avoid generalizing, 3) focus on the issue, not what they do not like about the other person, and finally, 4) remain focused on the present and future not the past when interacting with their co-parent. All but one interviewee stated they used texting (a non-visual communication) to exchange information about their child with their co-parent.

All interviews took place on the telephone where no visual cues were available to both pace the interview and confirm a participant had no more to say about a question. At times it was

difficult for the researcher to determine if a respondent had finished their answer. There were thirty eight questions, many of which were followed by “how, what or why.” The responses to specific questions are presented in the naturally evolved categories that follow: demographic data of subjects, the co-parent relationship, parenting plan workability, conflict in co-parenting, relationship with your child, effects of the court process and finally the effects of the FTC© parenting program.

Demographic Data

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The sample for this study was comprised of five never-married parents, two females, and three males. One participant self-identified as White and African American, the remainder self identified as White. Subjects ranged in age from 22 to 41 years old, with two in their early twenties, two in their early thirties and one just over 40 years old. All participants reported having a high school diploma, two had attended some college, one had a technical school certificate, and one reported having two associate degrees. Three respondents had sons ranging in age from 20 months to five years old; two respondents had daughters, one age 20 months, and the other nine years old. (See Table 1)

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Age of Participants	Self Identified Race	Education	Gender of Participant	Gender of Child	Age of Child
23	White/Caucasian	2 years college	Female	Female	20 months
22	White /African American	H. S. diploma Technical school certificate	Male	Male	20 months
34	White	2 Associate degrees	Male	Male	3 ½ years
41	Caucasian	H.S. diploma	Male	Female	9 years
32	White	Some college	Female	Male	5 years

The Co-Parent Relationship

This section provides data related specifically to the relationship between co-parents. Interviewees were asked first if they had been together before their child's birth, for how long and how long they have lived apart. Second, how would they describe the relationship? Next, participants discussed the positive in their relationship and described the problems. Finally, participants were asked to consider what they would want have change in their co-parent relationship if it could?

Four participants stated they were romantically linked with their child's other parent before the birth of their child. The fifth participant had split up before finding out about the pregnancy, and then got back together because of the pregnancy. When participants were asked how long they were together before the birth of their child two responded about one year, one stated seven years, another stated one month and the last reported four years with "lots of breakups". Three participants reported living apart from their child's other parent for two to three years, one stated they had been apart for seven years and the shortest time apart was 18 months.

When participants were asked to describe their current relationship with their child's other parent single words ranged from "horrendous" (n=2) to "tense" (n=1), and finally "good" (n=2). One participant stated he believed his co-parent has "some type of mental disorder or personality disorder" adding there were no positive aspects to the relationship. Two participants who described their relationship in negative terms emphasized they still communicated for their child's sake. Those participants who responded "no" to the existence of problems in their relationship described "better" and "good communication" as the positive aspects. One participant confirmed "when it comes to my son, we both have his best interests in mind" as the

positive aspect, and one participant described feeling “so horrible” that there was nothing positive.

The final question in this section asked participants if their child ever sees or hears them arguing with their co-parent. All but one respondent stated “No.” One respondent recalled, “Yeah, my daughter has seen the two times my ex-wife assaulted me and she got arrested for one of the times.” The fact that the respondent used the words “ex-wife” did not seem out of line as this respondent also stated being with his coparent in a relationship for seven years prior to the birth of their child, longer than any other respondent.

When it came to asking participants what they would want to change in their co-parent relationship, answers were all different and seemed consistent with other remarks that participant had made about their specific circumstances. One participant responded with “The amount of time I get to see him”, an answer not related to the actual question. Another participant mentioned wanting to work out “paying child support” because “I also have him the majority of the time.” The three responses that stood out for their emotional content were:

Just that our communication could be better. I understand we're not going to agree on everything when it comes to parenting, especially when he has new women in and out of his life that are going to have different parenting styles of their own as well. But just to kind of solidify that we are the parents of this one child and be able to communicate, which we aren't doing.

Just some -- civility. Just to have her realize that my daughter is soaking all of this in, and it's going to affect her someday, if it hasn't already.

The boundaries, knowing that when I have my son it is my time with him and when he has his son it is his time with him, you know, not to keep on pulling for more, more, more, you know?

The amount of time the participants spent with their child was a dominant theme, whether they were discussing themselves or their co-parent. The idea of visitation or custody is part of a parenting plan.

Parenting Plan Workability

This section asked participants to determine which parent is the *more time* or *less time parent* and describe what they believe the biggest challenges are to both roles. The FTC© curriculum highlights this distinction for never-married parents in order to build empathy for the co-parent. The *less time parent* would be with the child less than fifty percent of the time; the *more time parent* would be with the child more than fifty percent of the time. Questions about how the parenting plan is working for the participant and their child were followed with whether taking the FTC© parenting program influenced the parenting plan and how. Finally participants were asked how they share information with their co-parent about their child and how major decisions for their child concerning education, medical care, and religious practices are made.

Of the five interviewees, two were less time parents, two were more time parents, and one interviewee stated “I would consider myself to be the more time parent. I mean even ---it is like literally 50-50, you know... When he is with me, he is with me. And when he is with him, he is with his grandparents.” So I would consider it more [more time parent]”. When it came to participants describing their greatest challenge as the more or less time parent as well as their co-parents’ answers seem to align again with the running theme of each individual participants’ biggest concern.

One interviewee stated the greatest challenge as the more time parent was “juggling work with her...and letting her go with her father.” Another interviewee reported the greatest challenge as “the bonding ...spending time with him in general.” “The biggest challenge is consistency. You know he doesn’t have very many boundaries over there”, reported one interviewee. Another interviewee emphasized “Not being able to be a father, you know, it’s the simple things, you know, like I would love to be able to teach my daughter about stranger danger and stuff like that.” Different from all other responses was one interviewee who, in what seemed like a struggle to answer, spoke of wanting to be with their child all the time, reporting “I don’t get paid hourly, either it’s by the job-- it’s one thing that’s kind of been killing me but at the same time, I have also been home with him and it’s one thing I do love.”

Responses to what participants would guess their co-parents greatest challenge is as a more or less time parent where inconsistent with each other. They varied from “too much parenting I would think”, to “when he is with his father - he [their child] asks to come home all the time. I think that would be a challenge for him.” Another participant described feeling that her co-parent’s greatest challenge is being a father to their child only for his own mother’s benefit, “just trying to force that relationship [father] because he thinks he has to.” The themes particular to each interviewee were present when workability of the parenting plan was discussed.

Every interviewee had a court ordered parenting plan in place. Most (n=4) reported the plans are working for them. Two interviewees explained that a return to school had caused them to modify the court ordered plan (without court approval) with their co-parents support. Another interviewee, who reported the plan is not working, stated that motions had been filed in court but the court date “keeps getting moved” so no changes had occurred. Consistent with the parenting

plan working for them, most participants (n=4) reported it was working for their child also. One participant stated, “Not to ... not good at all.”

As far as any influence the FTC© parenting program had on the parenting plan, over half (n=3) believed it had no influence. One participant explained The FTC© helped her realize she needed to follow the plan and not let “her see him outside of visitation.” Another participant stated:

I mean it's a nice program, but you know, I mean two rational people can come to the same conclusions that they teach you in class, and I understand that most people, when it comes to kids, lose their rationality about things. So I see the purpose for the class for some people, but I don't think everybody should be mandated to take it.

The previous statement was made by the participant who alleged that his co-parent had assaulted him, had a lawyer, and was filing motions in court because the parenting plan was not working.

The method of sharing information about their child varied. Most (n=4) primarily use texting to communicate with their co-parent about their child. The participant who does not text stated, “No texting”; instead this participant calls her co-parent on the phone or goes through her mother who “actually have [*sic*] a good relationship” with his mother. When sharing information in order to make major decisions for their child’s wellbeing regarding education, and medical or religious questions over half (n=3) of respondents reported making them by talking to their co-parent. One respondent simply stated “That’s on me”. Another respondent asserted, “That’s why I am going to court.” This response reflects the reasoning for including the discussion of conflict within the FTC© curriculum.

Conflict in Co-Parenting

The FTC© parenting program uses more than one modality in order to teach skills that are effective in minimizing conflict. This section of the interview asked participants to state if they were able to use any of the following skills from the FTC program to help them get along with their child's other parent. There are nine skills taught and they include: speaking respectfully, using 'I Messages' or 'I' statements, listen carefully; paraphrase (as in reflective listening), take turns talking; not interrupting, asking open-ended questions/avoiding assumptions, being specific when discussing a subject/avoiding generalizing, keeping focused on child's interests, focusing on the issues to resolve rather than other things you may not like about the other person, focusing on the present and future, not the past.

Participants were in positive agreement with their ability to use the following skills: speaking respectfully, listen carefully; paraphrase (as in reflective listening), being specific when discussing a subject/avoiding generalizing, keeping focused on our child's interests, focusing on the issues to resolve rather than other things you may not like about the other person, and focusing on the present and future, not the past. In response to using the skill of taking turns talking; not interrupting, most (n=4) stated "No." As far as asking open-ended questions/avoiding assumptions, most (n=4) stated "Yes." Participants use of 'I Messages' or 'I' statements was divided where more than half stated yes (n=3). One participant initially misunderstood the questions believing it included skills they tried to use with their child. This same participant mentioned his child in some way when answering most questions, a testament to the importance of their relationship.

Relationship with Their Child

This section begins by asking the participant to describe their relationship with their child as well as what they believe their co-parents relationship is with their child. There are three questions intended to uncover the use of some basic parenting skills and then three questions to elicit participants judgment regarding what their child needs from them, their co-parent, and in the future.

Responding to the question regarding their relationship with their child brought forth a burst of words such as: “Amazing”, “Incredible”, “Wonderful, loving”, and “It’s fantastic, perfect.” Another participant remarked, “Better than the one that I have with my father.” Comments on their co-parents relationship with their child took a decidedly different turn with statements such as: “I honestly couldn’t say”, “I don’t know”, and “I am not sure at all.” Two participants were more specific and reported, “I believe that it’s a loving relationship, but he does tell me that sometimes she gets mad”, “She has been subjected to too much negativity”, and “I’m afraid for her, I’m scared for her.”

Questions intended to reveal parenting skills, such as, Do you catch your child when they are being good and tell them?, evoked a resounding (n=5) “Yes.” Helping their child understand and accept their feelings most participants (n=4) said, “Yes.” Another participant confessed, “Probably not as good as I could.” All participants agreed it is OK if their child loves their other parent proclaiming, “Yes”, “Definitely”, with more than half (n=3) remarking, “Absolutely.” Fixing their child’s problems versus helping their child figure it out was a dominant “Yeah”, with most (n=4) participants. One participant stated, “I try to help him, you know, work through things...”

The FTC© curriculum spends considerable time focusing on what parents think their child needs. When asked if they are able to give their children what they need most participants (n=4) believed they do. One participant remarked, “Not completely yet.” The predominant theme when asked what participants believed their children need from their other parent was “Love.” One participant remarked, “That’s a tough question.” Participants whose child was male remarked that the needs of their child will change as he gets older and he will need more of a male influence. Participants with daughters remarked, “She will need more reassurance about life in general, more guidance” and “...emotionally and stuff she is going to need me in different ways.”

The FTC© parenting program curriculum is intended to enlighten the never married parents’ understanding that their actions affect their child. Completing the FTC© parenting program is mandatory for never married parents in Hampshire County who begin any court process involving the custody, visitation and paternity of their child. The next section examines what initially brought the participants of this study to court.

Effects of the Court Process

Time is provided in the FTC© curriculum for an attorney to present some basic information about going to court. The purpose of the following group of questions was to determine what brought participants to court the first time and how and if the FTC© curriculum had any influence on the process.

Participants were asked what made them go to court the first time. For most respondents (n=4), this question elicited more of a narrative than other questions. The predominant reason for going to court was child custody. One participant replied, “It was domestic violence.” The next two questions addresses the “if and why” regarding whether participants had returned to court

after completing the FTC© parenting program. More than half of the respondents (n=3) did return to court after completing the program - for custody and contempt issues. Two respondents did not return to court because completing the FTC © program approved their initial parenting plan without having return to court.

It was important for this study to examine if what was taught in the FTC© curriculum helped the subjects of this study get through the court process. Participants were asked if anything within the program helped them and if so – “what and how.” Most respondents (n=4) stated they were helped by the information provided in the FTC curriculum. Another participant reported that their lawyer provided them with information and support. For one participant, the attorney who spoke during the program was of help. Another participant remarked that listening during the FTC © class to other people’s court stories was helpful. “Yeah absolutely. Yeah definitely” was the shortest reply.

Effects of the FTC© Parenting Program

In this final section participants were asked to explain what part(s) of the FTC© parenting program had a major effect.. Of equal importance, participants were asked if they thought about their child before and after completing the program, what did they learn and use that had an effect on their child. Participants were also invited to identify what the FTC© parenting program did not include that would have been useful. In closing, participants were queried about their willingness to attend possible future parenting education programs as well as to suggest what topics would be of interest to them.

When recalling the major effects of the FTC© parenting program each respondent’s answer was unique to their situation. One participant noted, “I learned that not everybody has as good a relationship with their co-parent as me and my ex do.” Another respondent remarked, “So

finding out that there were other dads that were in a similar circumstance as you as well as kind of ways to sort of brainstorm and kind of troubleshoot being able to get some time, both those things were really...had a major effect.” Still another participant reported, “...how to speak to your child and to make sure you are not projecting any negative thoughts or negative vibes about your ex.” This same participant went on to say, “...you know, for instance I started baking cookies every time I would see her, you know, go ahead and give some to your mom and stuff like that, little comments her and there.” One parent said simply, “I don’t know to be quite honest.” Another parent expressed learning that she and her co-parent had to do better for the well being of their child, reporting, “ We need to think about the fact that we have this kid for the next 18 years.” This parent emphasized the following:

And we just -- we really need to do this. And I've never would've said that if it wasn't for the class. I never would've put that out there and said that I knew we needed to do better, because I do know we need to do better, but there's just only so much I can do.

When parents were asked what they learned from the program and then used with their children, more than half of the participants (n=3) reported there was nothing. One participant stated further, “... because I didn’t treat him any different before than I do now.” Another parent acknowledged, “The only thing I should try to do is help them have it [a relationship] if they’re choosing to have it.” This same parent became emotional after responding to the question. Another participant explained not wanting to answer the question without knowing and including his co-parents “situation.”

Most participants (n=4) said there was nothing the FTC program did not cover that they wished had been. Another participant reported wanting to learn what to do if you cannot work

with your co-parent because they refuse to talk to you. Interest in future parenting programs was divided. Answers ranged from “Yeah”, “It would depend upon the topic of the class”, “If it was mandatory for both parents to go” to finally, “No, I’d be all set.”

Of the two participants who reported they would be interested in attending future parenting programs, one mentioned a parenting skills class that focuses on parenting through the child’s developmental stages. Another parent who had become emotional answering the previous question stated wanted to learn “Where is the line? When do I know that I’m allowed to make a judgment call? How much does he have to do for me to be able to say no?”

Summary

This chapter is a presentation of the findings from 38 questions asked of five never-married parents who completed the mandated FTC© Parenting Program during the period of September 2010 to March 2012. Interviewees were in most cases positive in their responses to questions concerning the FTC© parenting programs curriculum meeting their general needs. In areas where responses varied, the individual narratives and situations varied. Aspects of individual narratives remained consistent through entire interviews. Once all questions were asked, a pattern appeared to emerge in individual responses that may be due to each never-married parent’s individual status and circumstances.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, retrospective study is to explore the effects completing a mandated parenting education program has on never-married couples with children who engage in family related litigation. A never-married parent who files a complaint at the Probate and Family Court in Hampshire County, Massachusetts seeking to establish paternity, custody, visitation or financial support is *mandated* to attend the For The Children© (FTC©) parent education program. The program's sole purpose is to support the specific needs of never-married parents as they dissolve their relationships and prepare to co-parent. This study, done in collaboration with the Hampshire County Bar Association (HCBA), solicited the perspective of five past FTC© participants and inquired, "Are the unique needs of never-married couples with children engaged in family related litigation met in the curriculum of the current parenting education program and what additional skills or information would be helpful?" This chapter reviews the findings, limitations, and implications and provides a conclusion with ideas for future research.

Key Findings

Although only a relatively small sample was included in this study, the findings present a picture of the complex and unique needs of separating never-married parents. To date, there exists not one piece of literature related to parent education programs created for never-married parents seeking to dissolve their relationship. Therefore, key concepts within the curriculum of

the FTC© parenting program, also used as a framework for the open-ended, semi-structured interviews used to collect data, provide a loose structure for the purpose of this discussion. They are: a) one parent's relationship with his/her co-parent, b) the workability of the parenting plan, c) conflict in their co-parenting relationship, d) parent's relationship with their child, and e) the effects of the FTC© parenting program. Woven through the discussion is a comparison of participant demographics to available literature and public policy's response to the circumstances of never-married parents.

The FTC© parenting program is the only mandated program of its kind in the United States and has never been qualitatively examined. This status resulted in my having a certain degree of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of a semi-structured interview to evoke narratives that adequately answer the main question posed by this study. None the less, a significant proportion of the key findings collected from the narratives of five never-married parents suggests that the FTC© curriculum is meeting some of their unique needs.

Relationship with their co-parent

The ability to co-parent effectively, grounded in the ability to utilize communication and conflict minimizing skills, directly affects child outcomes and well being (Carlson, McLanahan & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). The majority of participants reported that communication with their co-parent was good despite the fact that more than half also stated their personal relationship with their co-parent was not positive.

The word, love, is not prevalent in the literature related to never-married parents. England and Edin (2007) who called their study *Time, Love, and Cash among Couples with Children* (TLC3) embedded it in the larger, quantitative, national, and longitudinal Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study (FFCWBS). England and Edin (2007) studied only couples

who were romantically involved at the time their child was born; this status, the authors reported, comprises eighty percent of never-married couples nationwide who birth a child. Data from the FFCWBS reported fifty to seventy-five percent of unmarried parents had broken up within five years of their child's birth. The majority of never-married parents in the current study were romantically involved at the time of their children's births and had ended their romantic relationship within two months to two years after the births. All participants of this current study stated they have earned a high school diploma, versus twenty five to thirty percent of couples with children in the TLC3 study.

Conflict in their co-parenting relationship

. The ©FTC program makes never-married parents aware of the negative impact witnessing arguing and fighting may have on a child and teaches skills to minimize conflict. Most participants reported that their children never see nor hear them argue with their co-parents. Facilitators of the FTC© program demonstrate specific communication skills and present role plays to clarify what conflict looks like and possible methods of responding. Literature on how and if never-married parents retain and continue to utilize learned skills to maintain a relatively low conflict co-parenting relationship does not exist. In this study, never –married parents were asked if they practice any of the nine possible communication skills the FTC© teaches. The majority of participants stated they used most of the skills taught. Most never-married parents did not report they used skill of taking turns speaking, and not-interrupting.

One participant became emotional and teary during the interview as she discussed her co-parent's apparent emotional deception in regard to the status of their romantic relationship. This deception caused the participant to constantly question her co-parent's motives on every level and the safety of their child while in the co-parent's care. She expressed a constant struggle with

having to abide by a court ordered parenting plan where her child returned from visits with her other parent smelling of cigarette smoke. Overall there exists a high degree of mistrust between this participant and her co-parent causing the participant to exclaim, “Why should I stick to an order he’s not sticking to? When are you allowed to make a judgment call on your child’s safety [while in the care of their other parent]?” It was not clear whether her high level of distress related to his co-parenting was influenced by the breakdown in their romantic relationship. Resolution in regard to the dissolution of the never-marrieds romantic relationship could improve their ability to effectively utilize those skills learned in the FTC© parenting program. The rising numbers of never-married parents and variability of their romantic circumstances may be an area where clinical social workers could provide therapeutic support, ultimately benefiting the never-married parents as co-parents and former partners.

Their relationship with their child

Society does not provide a road map for never-married parents to dissolve their relationship and move forward positively to sustain the well-being of their child. The one study available that focused on a father’s involvement in a child’s life after a non-marital birth states that only twenty percent will have a consistent relationship with their child by the time the child is an adolescent (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010). If co-parents have no understanding of their individual and their co-parent’s roles in the lives of their children after a break up, it is more likely that the father will disengage from their former partner (Cooper, Beck & Hognas, 2011). Every participant reported that not only is it acceptable that their children love their other parent, but absolute. Discussing what their children need from their other parent all participants included in their answer, “love.”

The workability of the parenting plan

The idea of enacting a *parenting plan*, created between separating never-married parents, is invisible in the literature. Divorcing couples dominate the literature and citations are too numerous to list. If never-married parents are mentioned, it is with concern over the dismal lack of educational programs or support around how to co-parent. Judges in the Family Court system who contribute to the *Family Court Review*, a journal published by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, have reported deciding hundreds of paternity and visitation cases for never-married parents: “The sheer numbers alone cry out for a revolutionary new way of handling these cases by the courts” (Townsend, 2003, p. 354). Townsend (2003) added, “From a judicial perspective, successful joint custody requires communication, capable parenting, emotional stability, and no history of domestic violence between the parties” (p. 355).

Most participants reported a positive impact from the communication and parenting skills addressed in the FTC© program. It appears that social work literature has not caught up with a family structure which continues to evolve in form and definition.

The effects of the FTC© parenting program

Two male participants stated that they did not believe that the FTC© parenting program should be mandated and that they and their co-parents are mature people who know how to get along. One emphasized, “We’re not people that are at each other’s throats all the time.” Yet, these participants also stated their female co-parents had become “irrational”, causing them to go to court. One of the two interviewees when asked how he would describe his relationship with his son responded immediately, “Better than the one I have with my father.” This respondent further remarked, “My father wasn’t a very affectionate man. I always tell my son that I love him. But you know I didn’t always necessarily receive that as a child.”

The FTC© curriculum asks participants to make a list of what they were given by their parents and what they think their children need from them. Most participants remarked they wanted to give their children more or better in some manner than they had been given. The positive outcome is that participants will take the time to think about how they were parented and recognize where they may improve based on their childhood experience. There is no research that examines the relationship never-married parents had or have with their own parents. It would be of interest to understand if that parental relationship influenced any conscious or unconscious decision causing someone to become a never-married parent.

Limitations

This study was an attempt to explore and identify the unique needs of the never-married parent and how the FTC© parenting program is supportive of those needs. There are several limitations for this study. Great difficulty in recruiting never-married parents willing to interview limited the sample size substantially. The instrument was self-developed and the first of its kind. Although reviewed by an expert in the field and pilot tested, it did not elicit consistent narrative responses in terms of depth and detail. A participant's distinct set of current circumstances, related to 1) the previous romantic relationship, 2) variables that contributed to the breakup of the romantic relationship, 3) experiences in court, and 4) intrinsic emotional makeup created divergent narrative responses to many of the questions asked. The limited number of interviews (n=5) cannot serve as a representative sample and the generalizability of these findings cannot be assumed. It is possible that those never-married parents who volunteered for the study had other unsubstantiated reasons for deciding to participate. As subjects, they were different from those previously studied and reflected in the literature. The participants of this study all had high school diplomas, resided in a rural area, and more than half

were fathers. Most studies to date examined never-married parents in urban areas, relied on the reports of mothers concerning fathers, and most did not have a high school diploma.

Demographic data from the FFCWBS showed that unmarried parents were more often African American and Hispanic. However, most (n=4) participants of this current study self-identified as White. Considered a limitation of the previous literature is the use of reports from mothers about fathers (McLanahan & Beck 2011). More than half of the participants interviewed for this study were fathers who volunteered. Contrary to subjects of the FFCWB study who are all residents of large urban areas, all participants live in the rural area of Hampshire County, MA.

As a parent and student clinician, this researcher found it difficult to remain unbiased during the interview process. It is very possible this researcher influenced responses either through leading or not probing further. It was challenging throughout each telephone interview to ascertain when a participant had completed their response, therefore possible that complete responses were not recorded. This researcher recognizes the differences inherent between interpreting a live recorded interview and a written transcript.

Implications for social work practice

Participants indicated the FTC© parenting program was supportive of their unique needs. The numbers of never-married parents and evolving forms of family will continue to grow and change in the coming decades. Clinical social workers should recognize the changing forms of family and be sensitive to the unique needs of never-married parents who separate and attempt to co-parent positively to benefit the well-being of their child. The FTC© parenting program is in and of itself unique in its progressive and timely approach to serve never-married parents.

Current public policy makers would be well served to consider an alternative and additional method of supporting never-married parents who end their romantic relationship other

than funneling millions of dollars into marriage promotion programs. At this juncture, public policy does not offer financial support for any programming that even remotely resembles the FTC© parenting program.

Conclusion

The present study data provides a useful perspective for Family Courts to consider providing parenting education programs for never-married parents who come to court for assistance in making decisions for the well-being of their child. This exploratory study and its major findings provide an opportunity for the development of further research in more depth and scope as well as a basis from which curiosity and discovery may flourish. Public policy makers should review the possible implications to the approach of supporting never-married parents that the parent education committee of the Hampshire County Bar Association has pioneered and championed.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

**Would You Like the Opportunity to Give Feedback?
And Help the
For The Children© Parenting Program
Make a Difference for Future Participants?**



I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts and am conducting a research study in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree.

In collaboration with the facilitators of the For The Children© parenting program this study involves an hour long recorded telephone interview with questions exploring how the For The Children© parenting program was helpful and any suggestions for improvements to support you and your child. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained throughout the study.

As a benefit for giving your time and feedback you will receive a Visa Gift Card in the amount of \$25.00 at the time of the interview. You may also benefit from the knowledge that you have contributed valuable information to improving the program, and the creation of similar programs to support never-married parents and their child/children all across the country.

The first 15 eligible people to return the signed Informed Consent will be scheduled for an interview.

Participants eligible for this study would include individuals who (a) have completed the For The Children© parenting program, (b) were enrolled in the program between September 2010 and August 2011, (c) are 18 years or older, and (d) are available in April 2012 for an interview.

Appendix B

Informed Consent

March 2012

Dear Participant:

My name is Deborah Druar and I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am doing a study with the teachers of the “For The Children”© parent education program and the parent education committee of the Hampshire County Bar Association. Your opinion is important to future programs for never-married parents. This research will be used for the Smith College School for Social Work MSW Thesis, presentation and publication as well as presented at a conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC).

You are eligible to participate as you have completed the For The Children © Parenting Program, you were enrolled in the program between September 2010 and March 2012, you are 18 years or older, English speaking, and available in April 2012 for an hour long telephone interview.

If you decide to participate I will ask you four short screening questions to confirm you meet the criteria (listed above) for the study. You will then participate in a recorded, hour-long, telephone interview. This interview will ask you to share your experience as a participant in the For The Children parenting program. I will ask that you wait until I finish asking all interview questions before you give comments or opinions about the program that I have not asked about in the interview. The interview will take place on the telephone.

There are some potential risks of participating in this study. The questions I ask may make you feel uncomfortable, angry, or sad. It may be helpful for you to talk to a friend or family member about anything that comes up for you because of this interview. If you feel you need professional support, a list of phone numbers and websites to help you find someone is attached to this letter.. You do not have to answer any question during the interview that you do not want to answer. You may also decide to withdraw from the study at any time before, during, or after the completion of the interview up until April 30th, 2012, when the report will be written.

In appreciation for your time you will be given a VISA Gift Card in the amount of \$25.00 after your in-person interview. You should also know that the valuable opinions you provide will help to improve the FTC © program. Also, results from this study will be part of a presentation at a conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC). Your support could inspire future research and other family courts in Massachusetts and across the country to implement programs to meet the needs of never-married parents and their children.

Your confidentiality will be protected in a number of ways. Interview tapes are assigned a number and no names or locations are included in written transcripts (you are also asked not to say any names, your own, your co-parents, or your child’s during the interview). Some quotes

will be written in the final report but will be changed to remove any information that could link them to you. Instead they will say, “One participant said ...”, or “Another participant reported....”, so your privacy is protected. I will do my best to disguise all quotes. You should be aware, there is a small possibility the teachers of the FTC parent education program may be able to identify who is quoted based on their memory of your contribution during the program.

I will be the main handler of all data including tapes, written notes and transcripts, however my thesis advisor(s) will also have access to this information should I need help to complete this study. Any person working with the data or helping me transcribe will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. I will keep the tapes, handwritten notes, and transcripts for three years, in compliance with federal regulations. During this time, tapes, transcripts, handwritten notes, and consent forms will be kept in a locked cabinet. After the three year period has expired, all material will be destroyed or, if kept, will remain in a locked cabinet. The data will be used for my thesis and may be used for future presentations and publications.

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION AND YOUR RIGHTS; AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date_____

Date_____

If you have any questions, or wish to withdraw from the study, please contact:

Deborah Druar
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Quincy, Ma. 02169-8130

Or

The Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at
413-585-7974

Please keep a copy of this for your records, and thank you again for your participation.

Appendix C

Interview Screening Form

Interview #:

Gender:

Screening questions

- 1) Are you 18 years old or older?
- 2) Did you complete participation in the mandated For The Children© parent education program between September 2010 and August 2011?
- 3) Has your child's/children's other parent completed the mandated For The Children© parent education program between September 2010 and August 2011?
- 4) Are you available to attend an hour long in person interview at a Hampshire, Hampden or Franklin County Public Library on a Friday or Saturday in March of 2012 during library business hours?

Appendix D



School for Social Work

Smith College

Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 14, 2012

Deborah Druar

Dear Deb,

I am happy to approve your changes and your project. Your responses were very clear and professional.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David L. Burton'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.

Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Demographic

How old are you?

What race do you consider yourself to be?

How far have you gone in school?

Is your child a boy or girl? How old is she/he?

Co-parent Relationship

Were you and your child's other parent together as a couple before your child was born? For how long?

How long have you been living apart?

How would you describe your relationship with your child's other parent currently?

Are there problems in your relationship with your child's other parent right now?

What are the positive things about your relationship with your child's other parent?

Does your child ever see or hear you arguing with their other parent?

If something in your relationship with your child's other parent could change what would you want it to be?

Parenting plan workability

The FTC© parenting program talks about the "more time parent" and the "less time parent", which are you?

What is your biggest challenge as the "*their answer*?"

So your child's other parent is the "*opposite from above*"?

What would you guess is their biggest challenge as the "*opposite from above*"?

Have you and your child's other parent agreed on a plan for parenting your child?

How is that working for you? Are you able to stick to it? How do you think it is working for your child?

Did taking the FTC parenting program influence your parenting plan in any way? How?

Do you encourage contact between your child and their other parent? How?

How do you and your child's other parent share information about your child? (examples are phone, in-person, other family members, texting)

How are major (like education, doctors/medical, and/or religious) decisions made about your child's wellbeing?

Conflict in co-parenting

The FTC© program talks about how conflict, (like arguments and fights) between you and your child's other parent affects your child, especially if they witness it.

Please tell me if you are you able to use any of the following skills from the FTC program to help you get along with your child's other parent.

Please answer just yes or no after I name the skill.

ALL SIMPLE YES OR NO

Speak respectfully

Use "I Messages" or "I" statements

Listen carefully, paraphrase (as in reflective listening)

Take turns talking; not interrupting

Ask open-ended questions/avoid assumptions

Be specific when you discuss a subject/avoid generalizing

Keep focused on child's interests

Focus on the issues to resolve rather than other things you may not like about the other person

Focus on present and future, not past

Relationship with your child/children

How would you describe your relationship with your child?

How would you describe the relationship your child has with their other parent?

Do you “catch” your child when they are being good and tell them?

Do you help your child understand and accept whatever they are feeling?

Is it OK if your child loves their other parent?

Do you try to fix your child’s problems or help them figure it out?

Are you able to give your child what you think they need?

What do you think they need from their other parent?

As your child gets older do you think those needs will change?

Effects of the court process

What made you go to court the first time?

Did you go back to court after you finished the FTC© parenting program? Why?

Did any information you learned from the FTC© parenting program help you get through the court process? What? How?

Effects of the FTC© parenting program

What did you learn from the FTC© parenting program that had a major effect on you?

If you think about your child before you took the FTC program, and then after, what did you learn and use that you believe had an effect on your child? And what was the affect?

Is there anything the FTC program did not cover, go over, or teach, that you wished had been?

If offered in the future, would you want to attend more parenting programs? What would you like to learn?

Appendix F

LIST OF REFERRAL SOURCES

National Association of Social Workers

**For a referral to a local counselor

750 First Street, NE, Suite 700

Washington, DC 20002

202-408-8600

<http://www.socialworkers.org>

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

**For a referral to a local counselor

112 South Alfred Street

Alexandria, VA 22314-3061

Phone: (703) 838-9808

<http://www.aamft.org>

American Psychological Association

**For a referral to a local counselor

750 First Street NE

Washington, DC 20002

Telephone: 800-374-2721 or 202-336-5500

TDD/TTY: 202-336-6123

<http://www.apa.org>

American Psychiatric Association

**For a referral to a local psychiatrist

1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1825

Arlington, VA 22209

1-888-35-PSYCH or 1-888-35-77924

www.psych.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Appendix G

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION

15 Gothic Street, Suite 10
Northampton, MA 01060-3084
Phone: (413) 586-8729 Fax: (413) 586-7388
Email: hcba@crocker.com

Officers

LESLIE McLELLAN BROWN, President
ELIZABETH D. KATZ, President-Elect
JON HEYMAN, Secretary
ALFRED P. CHAMBERLAND, Treasurer

Executive Committee

JESSE M. ADAMS
KATHERINE CALLAGHAN
MARISSA ELKINS
ANDREW J. SIEGEL
STEPHEN J. SLOAN

Executive Director
REBECCA J. RYAN

November 1, 2011

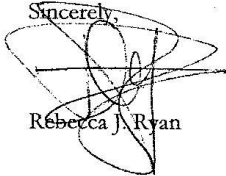
Smith College
School for Social Work
Lilly Hall
Northampton, MA 01063

RE FTC & PACT Research

To Whom It May Concern:

The Hampshire County Bar Association gives permission for Deborah Druar to locate her research in this agency. We do not have a Human Subjects Review Board and, therefore, request that Smith College School for Social Work's (SSW) Human Subject Review Committee (HSR) to perform a review of the research proposed by Deborah Druar. The Hampshire County Bar Association will abide by the standards related to the protection of all participants in the research approved by SSW HSR Committee.

Sincerely,



Rebecca J. Ryan

Appendix H

Professional or Volunteer Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality

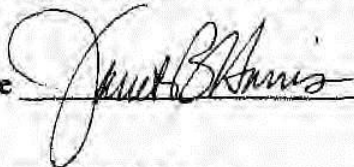
This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer, or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, Deborah Druar shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Deborah Druar for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

Signature _____



Date _____

May 14, 2012

Researcher: Deborah Druar

Date _____