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Randomized Control Trial: Online Parent Program and Waiting Period for Unmarried Parents in Title IV-D Court

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Despite a lack of research on parent education programs for unmarried parents, many judicial officers mandate participation. We recruited an understudied sample likely at high risk for negative outcomes—182 court cases involving unmarried parents on government assistance in which paternity was contested and then established via genetic testing ordered by the court. This 2 × 2 randomized controlled trial evaluated the impact on initial litigation outcomes of two factors: (a) participation in an online parent education program or not and (b) having a waiting period between the establishment of paternity and the court hearing concerning child-related issues or not. Using an intent-to-treat framework, we found that among cases not assigned to the program, there was no difference in the rate of full agreement on child-related issues (e.g., child support, custody, parenting time) when comparing cases assigned to a waiting period and cases not assigned to a waiting period. In contrast, for cases assigned to the program, cases also assigned a waiting period were less likely to reach a full agreement than cases that had their hearing on the same day. In addition, cases in the "program and waiting period" condition were less likely to return to court for their hearing than cases in the "no program and waiting period" condition. In exploratory analyses of the subsample of cases in which both parents were present at the court hearing, the pattern of results remained the same, although the findings were no longer statistically significant.

Keywords: unmarried parents, Title IV-D, contested paternity, paternity establishment, online parent education

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Forty-one percent of children in the United States are born to unmarried mothers (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Matthews, 2013). The relationships of unmarried parents can be unstable, putting the children of such relationships at risk for a variety of psychological, behavioral, and academic problems (Cooper, Osborne, Beck, & McLanahan, 2011). Furthermore, unmarried parents seek judicial input to resolve child-related disputes more than divorcing couples (Insabella, Williams, & Pruett, 2003), and in difficult custody cases, family psychologists may be asked to provide evaluation, consultation, and recommendations to the judge. The long-term consequences of parental conflict following separation include increased litigation and nonpayment of child support (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Rudd, Ogle, Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate, & D'Onofrio, in press; Seltzer, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998), and these families, on average, already experience more economic distress than other families, with 20% of unmarried parents versus 9% of married parents being below the poverty line (Kennedy & Finch, 2012). Existing data suggest the importance of supporting unmarried parents as they negotiate separation-related issues.

Yet, it is important for professionals who work with this population, such as judges, lawyers, and family psychologists, to note that the relationships of unmarried parents are heterogeneous. As one example, at the time of the child's birth, nearly half of unmarried parents are cohabiting, whereas one third of mothers live with adults other than the biological father of their child (e.g., relatives), and 17% of mothers live alone (Sigle-Rushton & McLa-

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nahan, 2002). Given such variability, it is important to not only conduct research on "unmarried" parents as a group but also consider differing types of unmarried parents. The current study attempts to do so by recruiting a subsample that, to our knowledge, has never been previously studied but with whom court systems are asked to intervene—unmarried parents on governmental assistance in a Title IV-D court. Title IV-D of the Social Security Act mandates the establishment of paternity for child support payments by the nonresidential parent or else the residential parent risks losing their government benefits (see P.L. 93–647, 42 U.S.C. § 651 et seq.).

There are generally two ways to establish paternity. The first is by a paternity affidavit through which a man and woman agree that the man is the biological father. The second way is through court action, which may require the use of genetic testing to establish paternity. Among Title IV-D cases in the county where our study was conducted, 14% include contested paternity and require court action. We focused on Title IV-D court cases in which one of the parties contested the alleged father's paternity but paternity was subsequently established by court-ordered genetic testing (we refer to these cases as "contested paternity" cases). Such cases may represent some of the most economically stressed (e.g., parties are usually on government assistance) and conflicted (e.g., they need a court order to establish paternity) unmarried families. As such, they are at high risk for negative outcomes, and it is important to consider court interventions designed to decrease risk for these families.

One potential intervention that courts use to promote agreement and reduce adversarial proceedings is parent education. Although there are effective interventions for separating couples (Arbuthnot, Kramer, & Gordon, 1997; Wolchik et al., 2000), these programs often require significant investment (e.g., multiple group sessions with a trained leader). Interest in online versions of parent education is based on the assumption that online programs may be more cost-effective, flexible, and convenient (Bowers, Mitchell, Hardesty, & Hughes, 2011). Despite the proliferation of online programs, there is little evidence supporting their efficacy in general and no research evaluating their efficacy for unmarried parents (Bowers et al., 2011).

ProudToParent (Asher & Asher, n.d.) is a free online parent education program for separating parents who were never married to each other. In a recent 2-year period, more than 15,000 parents used ProudToParent in the United States (Asher & Asher, 2015), and it is used in many of the courtrooms in the county where the current study was conducted. However, there is no empirical research on its efficacy. Although ProudToParent is one of a few online parent education programs specifically designed for unmarried separating parents, it was not specifically designed for cases with contested paternity or in Title IV-D court; to our knowledge, no program is designed to meet the unique needs of various subsamples of unmarried parents. Previous to the current study, parents at the study site, the Title IV-D court, were not asked to complete any parent education program. However, the court judicial officer was asked to consider ordering parents to complete ProudToParent. Before doing so, he wanted to determine whether the program would be helpful to the families in his court. Thus, comparing ProudToParent to the existing court procedure of no parent education program was one goal of our study.

In addition, previous to the current study, the court's practice in contested paternity cases was to encourage the parents to resolve all child-related issues (e.g., child support, parenting time, the child's name) by agreement on the same day of paternity establishment (Indiana Code 31–14-10). This court procedure facilitates swift establishment of child support and capitalizes on the fact that both parents are often present to hear the results of the genetic test. However, if the establishment of paternity is stressful for parents, that stress may limit effective decision making (see review by Starcke & Brand, 2012), leading to a reduced ability to reach agreement in court. The judicial officer was interested in providing parents with a short (2–3 weeks) "waiting period" after the parties are provided with the genetic test results but before their court hearing. Thus, the current study was also designed to examine the effects of giving parents extra time to consider the new paternity information before their court hearing versus the existing court procedures.

The current study is, to our knowledge, the first randomized controlled trial of an online parent education program for unmarried parents. It also empirically addresses the timing of the court hearing after the establishment of paternity. As an initial randomized controlled trial in a real-world court, study outcomes were limited to information available in court records, but a focus on court outcomes is an important topic in itself, especially to family psychologists who frequently must consult on such settlement cases.

Method

Study Site

The study was conducted in the Marion County (Indianapolis, IN, area) Circuit Court's Title IV-D Division (Title IV-D court), which handles litigation for unmarried parents in which a parent is usually receiving some form of government financial assistance. In contested paternity cases, the mother, child, and alleged father complete genetic testing in the courthouse and return to court to learn the results of the tests. In the court procedures existing before this study, once paternity is established in the court, the parties begin negotiations with one another. A Title IV-D attorney ("child support attorney") is present to represent the interests of the state, ensuring that the child support is paid if the nonresidential parent has the means to do so and to assist parties in reaching an agreement in compliance with law. If the parties cannot agree on all issues (i.e., child support, arrearage, physical custody, legal custody, parenting time, tax exemptions, and child's name), they discuss unresolved issues with the Title IV-D judicial officer, who ensures establishment of a child support order and that any agreements made are clear and comply with the law. The judicial officer does not conduct a fully litigated hearing regarding the issues of custody and parenting time as these matters are outside the scope of the federally mandated Title IV-D program. If the parents cannot agree on issues, a temporary judgment is issued, if possible, with a future hearing set to fully litigate those issues in a different division of the court. Thus, coming to a full agreement eliminates the need for an additional hearing in another division of the court.

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Participants

The study sample is 182 cases that were initiated in the Title IV-D court. Such cases were eligible for the current study if (a) paternity was contested, (b) paternity was subsequently established by genetic testing ordered by the court, (c) both parents were literate (could complete study forms and the program), (d) neither parent was younger than age 18 years, (e) neither parent was incarcerated, (f) neither parent lived out of state (unable to come to court), (g) both parents were present by midmorning on the day of their initial court hearing, and (h) there was enough time in court to hear all the cases scheduled that day.

Study Procedures

Court interns aided the judicial officer in research protocols. Each morning that the court was seeing contested paternity cases, and prior to the arrival of parties at the court, an intern randomly divided every set of four eligible cases on the court docket such that each of the four cases was assigned to a different one of the four study conditions. This preassignment in blocks of four cases was done to obtain a relatively equal distribution of that day's court cases to each study condition to minimize disruption to court procedures (e.g., if, instead, all cases on a given day could have been randomized to study conditions involving a hearing a few weeks later, eliminating the need for the judicial officer that day and wasting court resources).

During the hearing that day, once parents were notified of the establishment of paternity, the judicial officer informed them that they were eligible to voluntarily participate in a research study about improving court efficiency. If both parents independently consented to study participation, a court intern separated the parents to independently complete a background information form, assigned the case a research identification number, and informed parents of their study condition.

Despite having randomly assigned cases to a study condition before they came to court or were invited to participate in the study, as seen in Figure 1, there was an unequal distribution of cases across the four study conditions. Using logistic regression

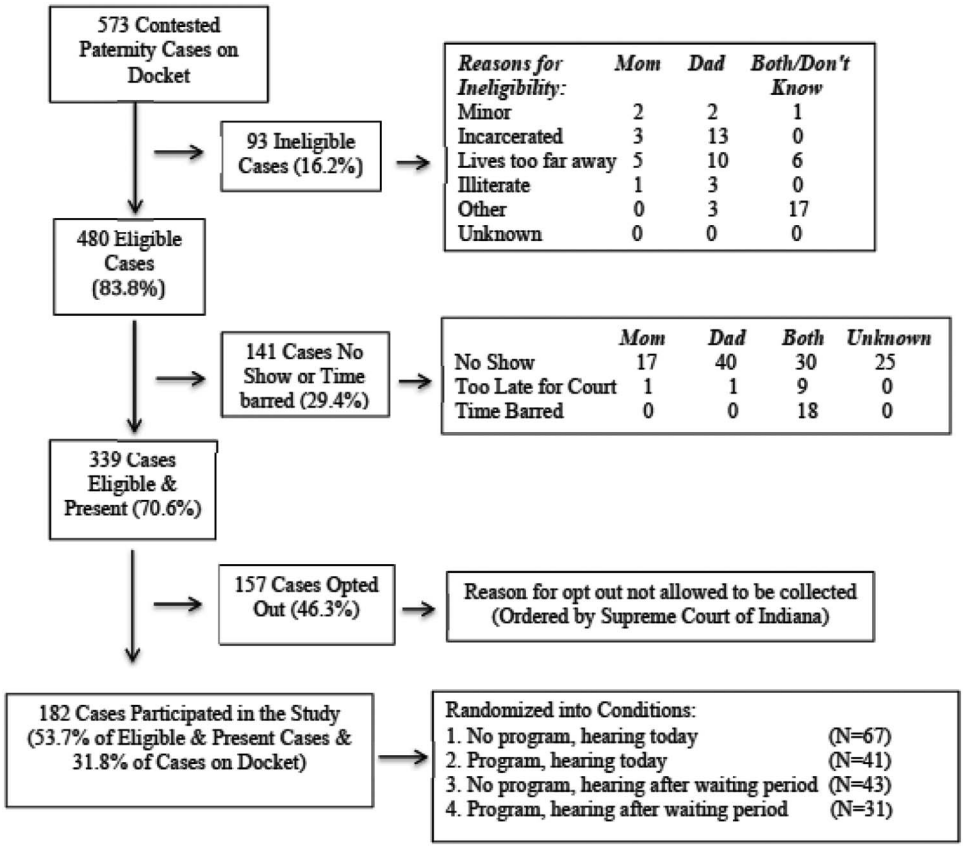

Figure 1. Court case flowchart. This figure illustrates the flow of cases through the court process and research procedure, in accordance with the CONSORT 2010 statement (Schulz, Altman & Moher, 2010). "Minor" = parent was younger than age 18 years; "Incarcerated" = parent was in jail or prison; "Lives Too Far Away" = parent lives too far away from court to complete all study requirements; "Illiterate" = parent self-reported that he or she could not read; "No Show" = parent did not show up for the hearing; "Too Late for Court" = parent came to court after 10:00 a.m.; "Time Barred" = there was not enough time left in the court session that day to have any more parents participate in the study. Participant recruitment occurred from November 8, 2012, through April 3, 2014.

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modeling, we explored whether these differences could be explained by different rates, across study conditions, in initial failure of parents to appear in court on the day paternity was established and were invited to participate in the study. In 29% of eligible cases, one or both parents either failed to appear in court to hear their paternity test results or arrived too late to be eligible for the study. Parents randomly assigned to complete ProudToParent and the waiting period were at an increased odds, but not to a statistically significant degree, for not showing up to their hearing, an anomaly, because they did not even know that a study was taking place. We also explored whether differences in study condition sample sizes could be explained by differential rates in parents refusing study participation after being invited to be in the study, either before or after being told their study condition ("opting out" in Figure 1). The court interns did not record when in the process a party decided not to participate in the study, nor did they ask participants their reasons for not participating, per the instructions of the Indiana Supreme Court, as the Court wanted to reduce the possible appearance of coercion of study participants. In 46% of eligible cases, one or both parties declined study participation, a similar rate to other family law intervention studies (Ballard, Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate, D'Onofrio, & Bates, 2013). We found that parents who were assigned to complete ProudToParent and the waiting period condition were at an increased odds for opting out of the study, but not to a statistically significant degree. Opting out of the study may or may not be related to study condition assignments. Cases declining to consent to study participation before knowing their assigned study condition would likely be random. Cases opting out of the study after being assigned to a study condition might reflect concerns about the condition (e.g., not wanting to do the program or wait for a court hearing). Although we were unable to collect data about why parents opted out, the interns reported that most parties opted out prior to being told their study condition, suggesting that although the unequal distribution of study participants across conditions is a limitation, it is unlikely to account for the study findings.

For cases in the study, the procedures continued as follows: participants in the "no participation in ProudToParent and hearing today" condition followed the court procedures existing before the study, immediately beginning negotiations with the state child support attorneys. Participants in the "participation in ProudToParent and hearing today" condition were escorted by court interns to a courthouse computer lab. The parties were separated and independently completed the online program. The court intern ensured completion of at least the required elements of ProudToParent, and the program generated a program completion certificate for parties to give the court. Then, the parents began negotiations. Participants in the "no participation in ProudToParent and waiting period" condition left the courthouse, having been assigned a future court date, 2–3 weeks later, to begin negotiations. Parents in the "participation in ProudToParent and waiting period" condition were also asked to come back to a court 2–3 weeks later at a set future court date. In addition, they were ordered to independently complete the ProudToParent program before their next court date and were provided with instructions to do so. They could complete the program at any time before the next court date and on any computer and were given a list of computer sites available for their use (e.g., library, court); they were asked to bring a program-generated certificate of program completion to their hearing. When these parents returned to court, they began negotiations. On average, parents in the "waiting period" study conditions had their hearings 3 weeks after the establishment of paternity ($M = 21.19$ days, $SD = 16.97$).

Measures

Court interns de-identified all records given to the research team.

Background information research form. This measure, available from the authors, was developed from existing measures and was independently completed by each parent immediately after they agreed to study participation. It assessed basic descriptive information.

Short-term outcome form. This form, completed by court interns regarding the outcome of the hearing, involved simple extraction of information in the court records, specifically the Title IV-D court hearing outcome: full, partial, or no agreement, as well as which issues were resolved through agreement. Seven issues could be addressed: legal custody, physical custody, parenting time, child support, arrearage (i.e., retroactively ordered child support payments), child's last name, and tax exemptions. It also recorded whether each parent had legal representation and whether each parent returned to court for the hearing if he or she was assigned to a study condition with a waiting period.

Online Parent Education Program: ProudToParent

ProudToParent is a brief, online parent education program for separating parents who were never married to each other (ProudToParent.org; Asher & Asher, n.d.). It is primarily an informational and inspirational program rather than a skills-based program. To receive a certificate of competition, a parent must complete 10 sections (e.g., Moving Our Relationship Forward, Getting Cooperation From Family and Friends) that include commitments the parents can make to their children and exercises that complement the commitments, for a total of 46 commitments and four exercises. An example commitment is, "Our child has a right to good relationships with both of us. The best parent is both parents." An example exercise is, "List 10 good memories and compliments to share with our child [about the other parent]." These required sections primarily cover the topics of reducing interparental conflict and the child's exposure to such conflict, parents working together to make parenting decisions as a team, and the benefits of maintaining both parents in the child's life. These content areas are similar to other online parent education for separating parents, but as a brief program, the required sections do not cover each area as deeply as some other programs. Parents can complete this required material in one half to 1 hr. On the basis of informal observation, the study court interns reported that most parties completing the program in the court computer lab did so in about half an hour. We do not know how long parties who completed the program at home took to do so because the program does not record that information. A coauthor (BNR), with two research assistants, conducted a content analysis of ProudToParent using the criteria by Bowers et al. (2011) for reviewing online parent education programs; those results are available from the authors.

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Results

Descriptors

On average, parents were in their late 20s (fathers: $M = 29.41$ years, $SD = 7.86$; mothers: $M = 27.03$ years, $SD = 6.52$), had approximately 12 years of education (fathers: $M = 12.08$ years, $SD = .94$; mothers: $M = 12.54$ years, $SD = 1.22$), and were low income (fathers: $M = \$13{,}140.24$/year, $SD = \$12{,}361.57$; mothers: $M = \$11{,}278.41$/year, $SD = \$10{,}347.49$); the majority self-identified as Black/African American (fathers: 75% Black, 24% White/Caucasian, 1% Other; mothers: 68% Black, 27% White/Caucasian, 5% Other). The average age of the child in the case was 3 years ($M = 36.16$ months, $SD = 43.08$), and 59% were female. In only 15% of the cases did the parents have more than one child with each other; however, 62% of fathers and 46% of mothers reported having children with another parent. Approximately 35% of parents reported "no" to the question, "Did you and the other parent have a relationship with one another?" ("yes" or "no"). Among those who did report having had a relationship, the relationship lasted about 3 years ($M = 3.29$ years, $SD = 3.22$), and 57% had lived together at some point, for an average of 2.48 years ($SD = 2.40$ years). Of parents who had a relationship, 83% reported that they were no longer in that relationship and that the relationship had ended, on average, 2.67 years earlier ($SD = 3.01$ years). Only 4% of fathers and 1% of mothers had an attorney.

We compared these descriptor variables across the four study conditions, using analyses of variance with Tukey's honestly significant difference post hoc tests and chi-square tests. As we conducted analyses on 21 variables, caution should be used in interpreting the findings. Indeed, as would be expected by chance, there was one significant group difference, in mothers', but not fathers', reports of having children with another parent, $\chi^2(3) = 8.03$, $p < .05$. Fewer mothers in the "program and no waiting period" condition had children with other partners (30%) than did mothers in the "no program and waiting period" condition (61%). Also, there were two nonstatistically significant trends. Mothers in the "program and no waiting period" condition were younger ($M = 24.77$ years, $SD = 4.50$) than mothers in the "no program but waiting period" condition ($M = 28.63$ years, $SD = 7.54$), $F(3, 176) = 2.63$, $p = .052$. Also, at a trend level, $\chi^2(3) = 7.22$, $p = .065$, parents in the "no program and waiting period" condition were more likely to have ended their relationship (94%) than those in the "program and waiting period" condition (79%), $\chi^2(1) = 4.20$, $p < .05$, or the "program and no waiting period" condition (81%), $\chi^2(1) = 3.97$, $p < .05$. No consistent pattern that would explain study findings (see below) emerged across these group differences.

Short-Term Outcome of Cases

The majority of cases came to a full agreement ($n = 140$, 77% full; $n = 26$, 14% partial; and $n = 16$, 9% no agreement). Parents, on average, were able to come to an agreement on six ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 2.13$) of the seven issues. Regarding specific issues, 89% of cases reached an agreement on legal custody, 89% on physical custody, 88% on parenting time, 82% on child support, 87% on the child's name, 87% on arrearage, and 82% on tax exemptions.

Reaching agreement. Two study outcomes were considered: whether the case reached a full agreement and the number of issues resolved out of the seven possible. Because the results for both outcomes were substantively equivalent, we present only the results for reaching a full agreement; results regarding the number of issues resolved are available from the authors.

For reaching a full agreement, we evaluated the main effect of timing of hearing (hearing same day = 0; hearing after waiting period = 1), the main effect of program (no program = 0; ProudToParent = 1), and the interaction of the waiting period and program, controlling for both main effects for the entire sample. This is an intent-to-treat analysis because it did not exclude parents who did not return to court after the waiting period (if in a waiting period study condition) or who did not complete ProudToParent outside of the courthouse (if in the "program and waiting list" condition). The parameter estimates and standard errors for each model are presented in Table 1. See Figure 2A for an illustration of the percentage of cases reaching a full agreement by condition. The interaction between timing of hearing and program was statistically significant. For cases not assigned to complete the program, we found a small, nonstatistically significant difference in rate of agreement by timing of hearing (not in program and hearing on same day = 85% reached full agreement; not in program and hearing after waiting period = 77% reached full agreement;

Table 1
Parameter Estimates and Standard Errors for Reaching a Full Agreement for All Three Models in Intent-to-Treat Sample and When Both Parents Were Present at Hearing

	Model 1, *b* (*SE*)	Model 2, *b* (*SE*)	Model 3, *b* (*SE*)
Intent to treat ($n = 182$)			
Waiting period	−1.27** (.37)		−0.55 (.50)
Program		−0.68 (.36)	0.23 (.59)
Interaction			−1.62 (.78)*
Both parents present at hearing ($n = 168$)			
Waiting period	−0.54 (.42)		−0.19 (.54)
Program		−0.15 (.43)	0.23 (.59)
Interaction			−0.94 (.87)

Note. Model 1 is the main effect for waiting period, Model 2 is the main effect for program, and Model 3 is the interaction of waiting period and program, controlling for both main effects. Parameter calculated using logistic regression. *b* is in logits.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

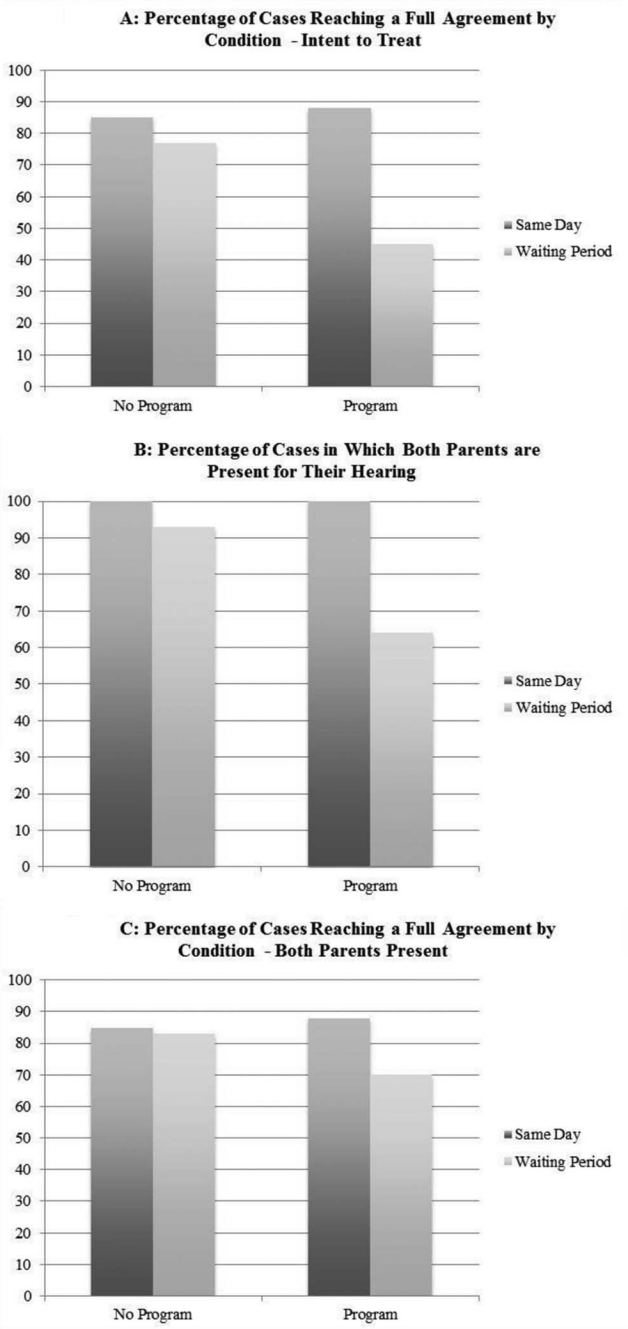

Figure 2. Illustration of main findings. (A) Percentage of cases reaching a full agreement by condition for the full sample. (B) Percentage of cases in which both parents are present for their hearing by condition. (C) Percentage of cases reaching a full agreement by condition limited only to cases in which both parents were present for their hearing.

$b = -.55$, $p = .27$; OR = .58, 95% CI [.22, 1.54]). In contrast, for cases assigned to complete the program, there was a larger, statistically significant difference by timing of hearing (in program and hearing on same day = 88% reached full agreement; in program and hearing after waiting period = 45% reached full agreement; $b = -2.17$, $p < .001$; OR = .11, 95% CI [.04, .37]). For cases assigned to complete ProudToParent, if they were provided a waiting period after the establishment of paternity, their odds of reaching a full agreement decreased by 89% in comparison to those who had their hearing the same day.

Failure to appear in court and its impact on agreement rates. Eighty-eight percent of the cases with no agreement were cases assigned to one of the "waiting period" study conditions in which one or both parents did not return for their court hearing and so could not reach agreement; such cases received a default court order and were counted as "no agreement." Among cases that failed to appear in court following assignment to a waiting period condition: in 14% of the cases, both parties failed to appear; in 29% of the cases, the mother failed to appear; and in 57% of the cases, the father failed to appear. Parents in the waiting period conditions were significantly more likely to have one or both parents fail to appear for their hearing if they were also assigned to complete the program (36% of cases) than if they were not asked to complete program (7% of cases; OR = 7.33, 95% CI [1.84, 29.29]; see Figure 2B).

Given this difference between the two waiting period study conditions in the proportion of cases that did not return to court for their hearing, we reanalyzed our three models, limiting the sample to cases in which both parents appeared for their hearing ($n = 168$). Findings regarding number of issues resolved can be obtained from the authors. The parameter estimates and standard errors for each model are presented in Table 1 (see Figure 2C for the illustration). When limiting the analyses to cases with both parents present at their hearing, the effect size for the interaction attenuated and became nonsignificant, but the pattern remained the same as the intent-to-treat sample analyses. Among cases in which both parents were present for the hearing and had not been assigned to complete the program, there was no difference in agreement rates by timing of hearing (not in program and hearing on same day [$n = 67$] = 85% reached full agreement; not in program and hearing after waiting period [$n = 40$] = 83% reached full agreement; $b = -.19$, $p = .73$; OR = .83, 95% CI [.29, 2.38]). However, for cases in which both parents were present for their hearing and had been assigned to the program, there was a nonstatistically significant trend for differences in agreement rates by timing of hearing (in program and hearing on same day [$n = 41$] = 88% reached full agreement; in program and hearing after waiting period [$n = 20$] = 70% reached full agreement; $b = -1.13$, $p = .10$; OR = .32, 95% CI [.09, 1.24]). For cases assigned to complete ProudToParent, if they were provided a waiting period after the establishment of paternity, their odds of reaching a full agreement decreased by 68% compared to those who had their hearing the same day, even when both parents were present at their hearing.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of the interaction of asking parents to complete a brief online program for unmarried parents, ProudToParent, and the timing of a court hearing after paternity had been established on whether parents reached a full agreement, an outcome that can improve court efficiency. The sample included low-income, unmarried parents and cases in which paternity was established by the court through genetic testing after paternity had been contested. This is a unique sample that family psychologists in court settings may encounter but that has previ-

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ously not been the subject of a court-related intervention study and may be at risk for negative outcomes, given their economic disadvantages and the contested nature of their paternity actions.

In an intent-to-treat analysis, cases randomly assigned to both ProudToParent and a waiting period following paternity determination were less likely to reach full agreement than were cases that completed ProudToParent and had their hearing on the same day of paternity establishment. There was no difference by waiting period (same day vs. waiting period) for those cases not assigned to complete ProudToParent. The findings from exploratory analyses conducted with the subsample of cases in which both parents were present in court and were thus able to reach agreement did not reach statistical significance; however, the pattern remained.

Part of the explanation of the intent-to-treat sample findings is the fact that some parties did not come back to court for their hearing. We lack information on why attrition was greater among ProudToParent participants with a waiting period than their waiting period counterparts who were not asked to complete ProudToParent. Perhaps parties did not complete the program, as ordered by the judge, and were thus concerned about returning to the court and coming before the judge. Or perhaps they did complete the program, and the waiting period gave them an opportunity to consider their upcoming court hearing, discuss it with others, worry about its implications, and decide to avoid court. If this proves to be the case, it may be necessary to follow such online programs with mediation or other family law interventions that facilitate negotiations and utilize conflict resolution strategies. However, even when considering only the cases in which both parents appeared at their court hearing, those who were in the "no program and waiting period" condition still had better agreement rates than those in "program and waiting period" condition, although those results did not reach statistical significance. Future research will be needed to replicate and explain this finding.

Child support agencies typically take into account the actual earnings and income of the nonresidential parent in establishing a child support order, which necessitates that the parent appear at hearings and that agencies refrain from issuing default orders in their absence. Because an unanticipated consequence of the waiting period and parent education condition was an increase in court nonappearance, our findings suggest that the immediate agreement-making goals of the court may be best served by having judges in the Title IV-D system "seize the moment" and try to help parents reach agreement immediately upon the establishment of paternity. However, longer term follow-up will be necessary to determine if such rapidly reached agreements hold up over time and whether such agreements are complied with, modified, and/or relitigated.

Additional consideration should be given to which programs are best for various types of unmarried couples. Parent education programs have intuitive appeal. As a program designed for unmarried parents, it was reasonable to consider ProudToParent as an intervention in our study. However, ProudToParent was not specifically designed for Title IV-D court cases or for contested paternity cases; the study findings suggest that it may be useful for family psychologists to develop programs that target the unique needs of differing types of unmarried parents. In addition, ProudToParent is a short program that does not systematically provide conflict resolution or parenting skills training and may not have discernable benefits unless used in conjunction with other family law interventions (e.g., coparenting classes or mediation). It may not be realistic for a brief online program to facilitate skill building; indeed, the most effective programs for building conflict management and parenting skills are more intensive (e.g., the 10-week New Beginnings Program; Wolchik et al., 2000).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations. First, because we only had access to court outcomes, an unanswered question is how the program and waiting period affected other important outcomes for families over time, including interparental conflict, parenting skills, social support for parents, and child functioning. Second, our results may not generalize to other subgroups of unmarried separated parents; for example, perhaps this program is useful for families with more economic means. Third, per the instructions of the Indiana Supreme Court, the court interns did not systematically track when or why parents opted out of the study. Thus, we do not know if there was a systematic bias that caused the unequal distribution of cases across the study conditions. Fourth, court interns did not systematically track whether parents in the "program and waiting period" condition actually completed the program, which precluded us from examining the specific impact of program completion rather than the impact of assignment to the program. Fifth, ProudToParent could be improved to better fit this population. For example, our informal measure of the program's reading level was 9.0 years of education, which is higher than the National Institutes of Health's recommended reading level (National Institutes of Health, 2007). Sixth, ProudToParent could make better use of technology to increase knowledge acquisition. The beauty of online education is that it can be tailored and interactive. Currently, ProudToParent does not test parents' knowledge, so it is unclear whether the parents are actively learning program content.

Conclusion

Courts are under increasing pressure to offer interventions to parents, and judicial officers want to help the families they see in court. Thus, it may be tempting to implement an already available program. The present study suggests that caution is needed in doing so. Until a program is empirically proven to have positive impacts with a particular group, those outcomes cannot be assumed. Indeed, some interventions that are intuitively appealing may actually be found to have harmful effects once tested (Lilienfeld, 2007). We call upon researchers, family psychologists, and family law stakeholders to examine interventions and policies used within family law to ensure that all parents in the court system receive evidence-based interventions.

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