

Kids at the Core



2022 Project Proud

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....page 3

Phase One Project Detail and Research Data.....page 4

Phase One Proposal.....page 8

Phase Two Project Detail.....page 9

Phase Two Proposal and Course of Actionpage 11

Jean Northern Award.....page 12

Conclusion.....page 13

Appendix A.....page 14

Appendix B.....page 16

Appendix C.....page 21

Appendix D.....page 22

Works Cited.....page 23

Introduction: Phase One and Phase Two

According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2017), one out of two marriages today end in divorce, and many of those divorces include children. Specifically, in Kosciusko County, there are approximately 160 divorces annually that involve children. This implies that 160+ minor aged citizens of our county are experiencing an immeasurable combination of grief and anxiety. When their fears are neglected, the negative impact that this statistic has on these children, their schools, and their community is immense and often times cyclical. The objective of our group is to place the focus on children impacted when divorces occur.

Phase one of the white paper project began at KLA's Session IV while hearing statements from Judge Kehler and Judge McGrath. The judges challenged cadets to take on a project that would examine different TransParenting options for divorce court. The phrase "TransParenting" is a general term for the educational courses that aim to teach effective parenting during the transition of a divorce or parental separation. Each county within Indiana has established guidelines that judges require of parents; Kosciusko County residents experiencing divorce are assigned to a TransParenting program. Essentially, to finalize a divorce that involves children, Kosciusko County adults must complete a standard, online instructional program. Although there is never a clear path to aimable family separation, a four-hour virtual course rarely proves to be the most effective path in gaining life-long strategies for kids and parents alike.

The AACAP goes on to state, "Young children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative or by withdrawing. Older children may feel deep sadness and

loss. Their schoolwork may suffer, and behavior problems are common.” (AACAP). In addition to looking at options for parental court mandates, our group also would like to focus on what can be done outside the home. Phase two of our paper entails the organization of training for elementary and middle school educators and counselors in Kosciusko County. Training will include ways school representatives can detect and intervene when he or she recognizes negative behavioral changes of children experiencing divorce.

Phase One Project Detail and Research Data

After Judge Kehler and Judge McGrath’s initial explanation of the urgent and growing need for assistance to minors in divorce court, our next step of phase one was to meet with the judges to review the current guidelines for TransParenting programs for Kosciusko County. Team members were given a book, Indiana Rules of Court Volume III – Local, and the current general order for paternity cases and standard order for filing of a custody action in Kosciusko County (Appendix A). Indiana Rules of the Court Volume III – Local, listed court mandates for Indiana Counties that had a population of at least 65,229. The most common TransParenting program used by the courts listed was UpToParents, a free, interactive website that offers certificates upon course completion. Out of the 25 counties listed, three counties (Madison, Johnson, Elkhart) required children between six years old and 17 years old or children between eight years old and 16 years old to attend some form of dissolution of marriage program for minor children (Indiana Rules of Court).

Currently in Kosciusko County, the first step is for the parents to go through a subjective assessment with the Bowen Center. Counselors at the Bowen Center then determine if couples

will need further on-site programs or whether they can opt for a four-hour online program. Because most individuals cannot afford the investment of both time and money for in-person training, many couples establish an impression of a working relationship before their initial assessment. This can be misleading and does not portray an accurate picture of a more volatile, possibly harmful environment for the children involved.

After the subjective assessment, the parents can opt for a four-hour online program. Kosciusko County currently uses two online programs. For paternity cases, the courts use the free option of UpToParents since the courts cannot impose a training that requires a fee. For filing of a custody action, the courts use OnlineParentingPrograms. The cost of this program totals \$57.99 per parent and is paid for by the parents.

After learning of these stipulations for Kosciusko County, the second step was to look at both online classes to see their offerings. First on the list was UptoParents, the free option used in paternity case, meaning custody cases in which a child's parents are not married. This website is listed in almost all Indiana Family Courts, either for a dissolution of marriage or the free program listed for paternity cases. This program puts a lot of emphasis on focusing on the perspective of the children involved in the divorce and how to communicate while co-parenting. There is a repeating theme throughout the 14 sections. Each section is broken down into four parts: motivational quote, "checklist" section affirming parent's roles in the children's lives, journal entry section and motivational text for completing the section. After completing the 14 sections there is no test needed to receive the certificate.

While going through the class, the first run was to intentionally see how fast it could be completed and whether ignoring all the content would still achieve the goal of receiving the certificate. The class's intended completion time is four hours which is the standard for court mandated programs. Our group was able to complete the course in under twenty-five minutes and the certificate was offered without reading any of the content. While not ideal, for a free online class, going through the class a second time did provide insight on a lot of topics that would be beneficial while co-parenting. A helpful element of this website is the worksheet (Appendix B) that parents can complete during the court proceedings to assist the courts with custody, child support and parenting time if the parents can agree on these important issues. Overall, UptoParents' largest draw is the free accessibility factor. From our research this appears to be the only option of its kind, and thus a good contingency plan for parents that want the easiest approach and a basic standard recommendation for all court systems. As with many free, online tools, however, its effectiveness depends on the effort put into the resource. It is disappointing that someone, and quite possibly a majority of the users, can click through the pages, skim pieces of information, and obtain the certification needed to gain full custody of a child experiencing extreme upheaval in their lives.

The second parenting class was the paid program that Kosciusko County currently uses for dissolution of marriage cases that involve children (OnlineParentingPrograms). This website has time-gated sections which means it *requires* four hours to complete the class. Like the first class, the goal of the initial run through was to ignore the content completely and determine whether a certification could be acquired. At the end of the four hours, there is a 12-question review test. Upon completing the test, a certificate is given. With a test score of 83%, the class

was successfully completed, and we now had access to the certificate required by the court. Similar to the first class, it was disappointing to find that, depending on their score, parents could ignore all of the training in the lessons and still receive the certificate regardless of their comprehension.

The second run through of this class took well over seven hours and the amount of material covered is much more in depth than the free class on UpToParents.org. Whereas the free class mainly focused on the children and children's perspective, the paid program covers adults taking care of themselves and co-parenting along with what to do when co-parenting is not working. In addition to reading a large amount of information, there are also videos, quizzes, and journal entries to keep the user's attention.

The last option of the current mandate is the section of co-parents that are referred to the Bowen Center program rather than the online paid class. After the initial subjective assessment, the co-parents would sign up for in class training at the Whitley County Bowen Center. Currently, Whitley County courts do not allow an online class; all of their TransParenting classes go through the Bowen Center in person. The number of families Kosciusko County mandates to the Bowen Center TransParenting class is minimal. As a result, there are no current classes taking place in Kosciusko County; those referred must go to Whitley County. The Bowen Center TransParenting class consists of two 4-hour classes that must be completed before a divorce will be finalized. When speaking to Bowen Center representatives however, there are no clear qualifications for "passing" the course nor is there a next step if attendees fail to establish an understanding or buy-in of the content.

While looking for other programs, we had to keep in mind that phase one primarily revolves around classes that could be court mandated and also available within the community. This stipulation limits the ability to incorporate different programs. One local program we found and investigated was Strengthening Families. Strengthening Families is a 14-week class that meets once a week. The goal of the program is to teach adults and youth to “set goals, manage emotions, and create better relationships” (See attached flyer in Appendix D). Additionally, it demonstrates ways that parents can “show love while setting limits, listen to their children, and how to show appreciation for each other” (Strengthening Families). Each week consists of an evening meal followed by age-appropriate learning groups for parents, teens, and younger children and concludes the session back in a family setting. While this program is located in Kosciusko County, 14 weeks is a large commitment that would be difficult to mandate when coupled with the upheaval of splitting a home and dividing day to day routines and weekly calendars.

While researching programs further, one program Judge McGrath suggested was Positive Parenting Programs or “Triple P”. Triple P offers several parenting classes that are age based and qualifies as a TransParenting class, however, the only online courses consist of a “Toddlers to Tweens” and “Pre-Teens and Teens” class. This TransParenting class is an in-class training and the closest Triple P program that we could find was in Elkhart County at the Child & Parent Services (CAPS). While the TransParenting class is not on the schedule, CAPS does provide weekly classes on different topics for the Triple P program (TripleP).

Phase One Proposal

Once again, the purpose of TransParenting classes is to teach effective parenting during the transition of divorce or parental separation. The goal is to set a standard two to three step approach with a secondary training for couples that are finding it difficult to co-parent. Currently, the paternity cases in which the parents have no legal binding to one another, and, therefore cannot mandate an option that has a financial obligation. Due to this prerequisite, the most viable option is to keep the same stipulation, mandating UpToParents, the most widely used free TransParenting class.

For the standard order for entry upon filing of a custody action when the parents are legally married, our group recommends all couples first complete the Parenting Plan Worksheet (Appendix B) within 15 days. Additionally, both parties will need to complete the four-hour online co-parenting class located at www.onlineparentingprograms.com. The amount of content and areas covered within the curriculum is far superior to UpToParents.

Onlineparentingprogram is much more applicable and comprehensive for a Dissolution of Marriage. Each parent shall pay the requisite fees for participation, and complete the online co-parenting class on or before 60 days being ordered by the court. Upon completion of both the worksheet and the online program, parties are ordered to download the certificate of completion and file the document with the court. The court may order both parties to attend additional co-parenting classes in post-decree matters which would consist of the Bowen Center TransParenting classes. This proposal includes the removal of the current subjective assessment, the addition of UpToParents worksheet, and the possibility of the post-decree order for two 4-hour in person courses held at Bowen Center.

Phase Two Project Detail

Phase two of our project is to develop a training program that will focus on strategies for educators and counselors as they approach students who are experiencing divorce and/or come from multiple home environments. With our research in phase one and the in-person element that is offered by the Bowen Center, the members of our KLA team reached out to Bowen Center representatives through email and Zoom meetings to inquire about a possible school personnel approach. As learned in the initial information gathering portion of the project, the outcome of the parenting classes is only as effective as the students' input. Unfortunately, this often means that the affected child has no quantifiable influence over their parents' conduct toward one another and ultimately themselves. As a result, a third party that has a stronger presence in the life of the child is needed. Given that the average child in Indiana spends 6.77 hours per day five days a week at school (National Center for Education Statistics), the education sector became the likely third party.

The three county school corporations became our next player in the project. After contacting members of the counseling department at Warsaw, Wawasee, and Tippecanoe Valley, it became clear that there are various positions throughout the school corporations that are looked to for guidance on a number of matters such as emotional, behavioral, mental, and logistical support for students. Certainly, educators wear many hats, but when speaking with the counselors, a majority indicated that although they have obtained a masters degree, their background does not include instruction on best approaches to children experiencing divorce. This was an interesting finding considering a large portion of children counselors encounter daily come from these types of home environments.

Multiple studies have shown that for children, divorce can be the indicator of multiple at-risk behaviors later in life (Douglas). Poor performance in academics, insecurities in social situations, anger, guilt, and confusion are all proven effects on children that may last many years after the event occurs. Like many unhealthy trends, early intervention is also a significant factor. This is why our group chose to focus on elementary and middle school counselors. When strategies are obtained during these formative years, children are more likely to form stronger, more constructive habits. Our most logical path to equipping adults close to them is to provide training with the educators who see them daily.

As was discovered through phase one, Kosciusko County's court system instructs divorced parties to the professional services of Bowen Center. Through multiple conversations, virtual meetings, and emails, Bowen Center agreed to be the licensed, professional source to provide the training. They would be able to host a workshop covering these topics. Upon their confirmation, representatives presented the members of the KLA team with an outline of possible topics to be covered (Appendix C).

Phase Two Project Proposal and Course of Action

While simultaneously working with the Bowen Center, members of the KLA team were also in communication with members of the Warsaw Community Schools, Wawasee Community Schools, Whitko Community Schools and Tippecanoe Value School Corporation. The goal is to have members from every school corporation within Kosciusko County attend the workshop. While both the Bowen Center Staff and school corporations along with the members of the KLA team are excited about the workshop, the one issue that we ran into is scheduling. During the

school year, teachers and staff are extremely limited on when they can attend a mid-day workshop. The goal was to complete the workshop within the KLA year, but due to the many constraints, that time frame did not work. Instead, the KLA team and the Bowen Center will be hosting the four-hour workshop next month on May 16th, 2022 from 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Administrators from all three corporations as well as Whitko Community Schools and Bowen Center have all agreed that an updated training session would not only be a direct benefit to the counselors but also staff and students. In fact, many of the scheduled participants have indicated that an annual training could be effective with updates from the latest findings in the mental health industry. School districts often require professional development hours for employees in one form or another, and many times this takes place outside of the county and even state. Bowen Center is able to provide a more local perspective on practices that may adapt themselves more effectively to Kosciusko residents.

Jean Northern Award

In Kids at the Core's inaugural training session, the Bowen Center has generously agreed to host the event, including the speakers, at their Jefferson Street location in Warsaw. As such, the only expense associated with phase two of our project will be food and refreshments for those in attendance. A KLA mini-grant will be utilized for this purpose once more solid numbers are secured with the school systems. In the future, however, funding would be requested by the Bowen Center as their professional services in the mental health industry can be very costly.

It is the hope of all entities involved that this training continues beyond 2022. In order to maintain the service, however, funding from schools' professional development budgets as well

as the the Jean Northern Award could be utilized to cover these expenses. Because of the initial exposure counselors will have at the half-day training session, our team feels it is likely to invoke a feeling of confirmation of effectiveness among those in attendance. Finally, it is the hope of the KLA team that this training becomes part of the annual professional development of the Kosciusko County school corporations with the evolution of the training continuing each year.

Conclusion

Our team utilized Judge Kehler and Judge McGrath's challenge to look at the current divorce court TransParenting mandates to see how it compared with other counties and made this the basis of our White Paper Project. While the team's focus for the TransParenting has always been on the children involved in divorce, the project quickly capitalized on the "doable" element of the project by expanding beyond the court mandates and to set up training for educators and counselors. As citizens who lack the ability to make authoritative decisions in a court setting, we will provide our observations and recommendations to Judge Kehler and Judge McGrath. With their expertise, they can make an educated judgement and take the proper bureaucratic steps to implementation. An action plan, however, came in the form of training educators and how to step in when they observe children struggling with the effects of divorce. We hope the training those educators and counselors receive will reduce the chance for those children to fall behind in school or display reckless behavioral problems in school, at home, and eventually, in our community.

Appendix A

IN THE SUPERIOR NO. 1 AND SUPERIOR NO. 4
COURTS OF KOSCIUSKO COUNTY
121 NORTH LAKE STREET
WARSAW, KOSCIUSKO COUNTY, INDIANA, 46580

GENERAL ORDER FOR ALL PATERNITY CASES AND CASES INVOLVING THE ESTABLISHMENT OR ENFORCEMENT OF SUPPORT

This Order shall apply in all paternity cases where the finding of paternity occurs after January 1, 2021 and all cases involving the establishment or enforcement of support. The Clerk is hereby ordered to issue a copy of this Order to all parties and attorneys in all new paternity cases and all new cases involving the establishment or enforcement of support.

In order that parents in paternity cases and cases involving the establishment or enforcement of support have the best opportunity to reduce conflict and build cooperation between themselves and their children, the Court **ORDERS** as follows:

1. Within 30 days of the filing of a Petition to Establish Paternity or Petition to Establish or Enforce Support based upon any in-hospital paternity affidavit signed by the parties **OR** within 30 days of the parties' receipt of the genetic testing results which evidence that Father is in fact the biological father, the parents shall each:
 - a. Log onto www.uptoparents.org, click the button entitled "Start New Use," complete Step 1 and 2 of the workshop.
 - b. Merge their chosen Commitments into a set of Agreed Commitments (the ones they mutually choose) by trading their

IN THE SUPERIOR NO. 1 AND SUPERIOR NO. 4
COURTS OF KOSCIUSKO COUNTY
121 NORTH LAKE STREET
WARSAW, KOSCIUSKO COUNTY, INDIANA, 46580

**STANDARD ORDER FOR ENTRY
UPON FILING OF A CUSTODY ACTION**

If appearing that the parties are the parents of minor child(ren), **IT IS NOW ORDERED** that each party shall:

Complete the four-hour **Online Co-Parenting/Divorce Class** located at www.onlineparentingprograms.com. Upon completion of the online program, parties are ordered to download the Certificate of Completion and file the same with the Court.

Each party shall pay the requisite fees for participation. Each party **SHALL ENROLL AND COMPLETE** the **Online Co-Parenting/Divorce Class** on or before sixty (60) days from the date of this **ORDER**.

www.onlineparentingprograms.com

DATED AND ORDERED _____



Karin A. McGrath, Judge
Kosciusko Superior Court No. 1



Christopher D. Kehler, Judge
Kosciusko Superior Court No. 4

Directions for Completing This Parenting Plan Worksheet

As the parents (and thus as the two people who can truly protect your children at this critical time), you should, if reasonably safe and possible, prepare a single version of this Parenting Plan Worksheet. If you cannot prepare a single version of the worksheet, you may prepare separate ones.

You will be helped in completing this Worksheet by first doing the work on the www.UpToParents.org website. (If you are open to the possibility of reconciliation, you can substitute the work on www.WhileWeHeal.org. Never-married parents can use www.ProudToParent.org.)

For help in completing, reviewing, and filing this PPW, you can receive free assistance by contacting the Domestic Relations Counseling Bureau (DRCB) at (574) 235-9662.

1. We have reached the following agreements:
 - A. How will you as parents be making the important decisions in your children’s lives? Please state whether you will be using cooperative joint decision-making (sometimes called “joint legal custody”) or whether one of you will be making the final decisions on such major matters as the children’s residence, school selection, medical care, and religious upbringing. _____

 - B. The children’s declared legal residence for school and legal purposes will be: _____

 - C. Our parenting time schedule for the children to be with each of us will be:

D. Child support: _____

E. Responsibility for the children's medical insurance will be as follows:

F. Other:

2. This is how we will be relating as parents in order to protect our children from having to see, hear, or take any responsibility for our conflict.

Example A: We are getting along well enough that we can use courteous face-to-face discussions about the children's issues and needs. The children saw us get through the difficulty of our physical separation in a cooperative fashion. All of us worked together to move some of Dad's stuff to his new apartment. With the counseling we are receiving, we think we can continue to relate well.

Example B: Our recent interaction has been quite strained. We have decided to limit our conversations to the telephone and to our counseling appointments until our interaction improves. Together we have told the children that they are not responsible for our fighting, and we have promised not to do so in front of them again. To carry that out, we have agreed that temporarily we will be dropping the children off at their grandparents' home, and we will not be having a lot of face-to-face meetings. We have agreed that when we are all together, we will limit our conversations to a few courteous sentences.

3. These are the resources we will be using to achieve and keep a child focus, courtesy, and cooperation between us. For example:

- (a) Redoing the www.UpToParents.org, www.WhileWeHeal.org, or www.ProudToParent.org website work.
- (b) Additional co-parenting classes, including re-attending the basic class or attending high-conflict classes.
- (c) Mediation.
- (d) Confidential therapeutic assessment of the parents by DRCB to develop a set of recommendations for their improved interaction. (The Court's order may specify that the recommendations either be shared immediately with the Court or be shared with the Court only if problems continue.)
- (e) Individual, joint, family, or child counseling.
- (f) Appointment of a psychologist or parent coordinator to work with parents.
- (g) Appointment of a child legal representative (CLR) or guardian ad litem (GAL) for the children involved.
- (h) Completing a new Parenting Plan Worksheet (PPW).

Example: We will continue to read regularly from our Agreed Commitments from the www.UpToParents.org website. We have also agreed to use at least four sessions of closure counseling over the next two months to try to help our children and ourselves adjust to our separation. We have agreed that we will use mediation or counseling should we have any differences. Our pastor has also agreed to be available to us.

4. We will be using these additional measures to protect our children at this critical time for them. (Circle all that apply and add any additional ones.)
- a. Remembering that our children will experience any attack between us as an attack on them.
 - b. Appreciating that for our children we will always be family.
 - c. Using every contact we have as an opportunity to create goodwill.
 - d. Bringing kindness to every occasion when we are all together.
 - e. Recalling that our children's only job is to be children, not our messengers, spies, counselors, confidants, or carriers of our hurt.
 - f. Being sure to remember that our love for our children is greater than any issue we could ever have with each other.
 - g. Regularly sharing compliments and positive memories about each other with our children.
 - h. Celebrating positive things they do with the other parent.

- i. Regularly encouraging them to call the other parent for a friendly talk.
- j. Respecting each other's parenting time while also being flexible, so the children's lives can be as normal as possible.
- k. Educating our extended families and close friends that they need to make peace as well.
- l. Paying special attention to keep our appointments and schedules with each other—and calling promptly if any problems come up.
- m. Others.

Father's name (typed or printed)

Mother's name (typed or printed)

Father's signature

Mother's signature

Date

Date

Signature of father's attorney

Signature of mother's attorney

Children have no defense against their parents' anger.
—Dr. Ross Campbell

Appendix C

Training Teachers and Support Staff on **Divorce**

*DRAFT. All topics will include the viewpoint/impact on children. The list below is fluid. Any/All topics can be modified/added/deleted.

- I. Overview of Divorce
 - a. Unscheduled Family/Life Transition
 - b. Social Acceptance
 - c. Demographics, Probability, Statistics
- II. Social Issues
 - a. New Normal
- III. Diverse Sociocultural Factors
 - a. Strengths and Challenges
- IV. Legal Challenges
 - a. Win/Lose vs. Collaborative
 - b. Custody, Visitation
 - c. Finances
- V. Reorganization of the Family Unit
 - a. Redefining Parenting Roles
 - b. Attachment, Ambiguity, Ambivalence, Anxiety
 - c. Future Structural Changes
 - d. Living Arrangements
- VI. Co-Parenting
 - a. Boundaries, Goals
 - b. Communication, Conflict
- VII. Protective Factors
 - a. Support Persons
 - b. Clear Communication
 - c. How to Identify Strengths
- VIII. Young Children through Adolescents
 - a. Loyalty
 - b. Triangulation
 - c. Common Feelings
 - d. Parental Relationships
- IX. How to Identify Children Struggling
 - a. What to Look For
 - b. How to Approach
- X. Resources Available
 - a. Books
 - b. Services, Programs in the Community
 - c. Individual, Family Therapy
 - d. Support Groups

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Strengthening Families Program, <https://kosciuskocares.org/programs/strengthening-families/>

Triple P in Elkhart County, <https://sites.google.com/heaindiana.org/triple-p-in-elkhart-county/home?authuser=0>