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PPCD RESEARCH REPORT

Evaluation of the Parents for Parents Program
King County, Washington



Permanency Planning for Children
Department
National Council of Juvenile and Family
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Executive Summary

Introduction

This evaluation of the King County Parents for Parents Program (P4PP) examines the program's efficacy and suggests areas for continued improvement. The goal of the P4PP is to engage and support parents who have become involved in the juvenile dependency system. The P4PP utilizes veteran parents (i.e., parents who had been previously involved in the dependency process) to provide educational and peer support to those parents currently traversing the dependency system. This evaluation has been conducted in partnership with the Washington Administrative Office of the Courts as part of an ongoing judicial workload assessment in Washington State. The King County Superior Court in Washington State manages and supports the P4PP.

Evaluation Objectives

This evaluation has five objectives:

- Describe the components of the P4PP
- Describe the participants in the P4PP
- Examine parental perceptions of the overall dependency process before and after Dependency 101
- Consider potential areas of improvement for the P4PP
- Make recommendations for future implementations of the P4PP

Outcomes

The findings from the current evaluation indicate that the P4PP is beneficial in:

- Educating parents on the dependency system
- Reducing anxiety about the dependency process
- Improving perceptions of CPS
- Reassuring parents that they are not alone

This evaluation relies, in part, on parent perceptions of the P4PP, including strengths and weaknesses of Dependency 101. Many of the findings are qualitative or descriptive in nature, with some use of basic statistics. An evaluation of the P4PP with more statistically rigorous findings concerning case outcomes is forthcoming.

Parents for Parents Program Evaluation

Background

As of September 30, 2009, 10,894 children in the State of Washington were in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Many researchers and policymakers have made it a priority to discover factors and programs that might assist efforts to reunify these children with their families. Within this context, King County and Washington State continue to assess programs that might improve the efficiency of case processing and increase the quality of case outcomes.

The Parents for Parents Program (P4PP) offers a catalyst for parental engagement and fits within the goals of Washington State because prior research (e.g., Leathers, 2002; Wood & Russell, 2011) indicates that increasing parental engagement helps to increase rates and timeliness of reunification. In addition, the P4PP may help parents understand the juvenile dependency process to increase active participation, reduce case continuances or contested hearings, educate parents on the role of Child Protective Services (CPS) in protecting the safety of the child, and increase parents' sense of support. This study allows for an examination of these hypotheses and explores how the P4PP changes parents' perceptions of the juvenile dependency system. An examination of whether the program might lead to different outcomes is forthcoming.

Program Overview

The P4PP attempts to engage parents early in the dependency process through education and peer support from "veteran" parents (VPs) who have successfully navigated the child welfare system. The P4PP had its ideological beginnings in 2004 at the Region 5 Reasonable Efforts Symposium. Pierce County implemented the first P4PP in 2005. As part of the implementation process, Pierce County used funding to develop and maintain P4PP's components: veteran parent support at 72-hour shelter care hearings, Dependency 101 and 201 classes, and peer-to-peer mentorship. Based on the Pierce County model, King County has now implemented a P4PP at both the King County Courthouse (Seattle) and the Maleng Regional Justice Center (MRJC; Kent).

Funding in King County has allowed for only two of the four program components in the Pierce County model: veteran parent support at 72-hour shelter care and Dependency 101 classes

Prior to the 72-hour shelter care hearing, a P4PP coordinator or a VP meets with the parents to help alleviate any apprehensions or fears about the dependency system. The VP also talks with the parents about the Dependency 101 class and the benefits of attending, signs the parents up for the Dependency 101 class, and sits with the parents through the hearing. If the parents do not attend the first hearing, the P4PP coordinator or a VP tries to make contact with him or her at a subsequent hearing.

Dependency 101

Dependency 101 is a two-hour, informational session that educates parents about the dependency system, facilitates collaboration between parents and Child Protective Services, and provides necessary tools and resources to empower parents in engaging in the dependency process. Dependency 101 is team taught by VPs and stakeholders, and is offered twice a month at the King County Courthouse in Seattle and once a month at the MRJC in Kent. During Dependency 101, parents typically do the following:

- Complete “Pre” and “Post” surveys to provide feedback on the class
- Receive a packet of information, including the P4PP Handbook (containing information about the dependency process, a calendar to document appointments, a phone list for phone numbers pertinent to their dependency, an “attitude” sheet, and other tools to assist parents), a Family Treatment Court (FTC) pamphlet, a list of current community resources, and a certificate recognizing participation in the session
- Watch an educational video about the dependency process
- Listen to two or three VPs share their experiences in the dependency system
- Hear from a Court Appointed Special Advocate, an assistant attorney general, a social worker, a Family Treatment Court representative, and a parent’s attorney about their roles and responsibilities and how they interact with parents, children, and the court

Evaluation Procedure and Materials

Four hundred-eighty parents (362 from Seattle and 118 from Kent) who participated in the P4PP between July 2009 and May 2011 provided feedback on their experiences with the program. Prior to beginning Dependency 101, participants were given a survey containing demographic

questions (e.g., gender, race, and age). In addition, parents rated nine statements relating to their trust in Child Protective Services (CPS), awareness of their dependency case issues, understanding of the roles of professionals in the dependency system, and their perceptions of control and feeling alone on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – *Disagree Strongly* to 5 – *Strongly Agree*.

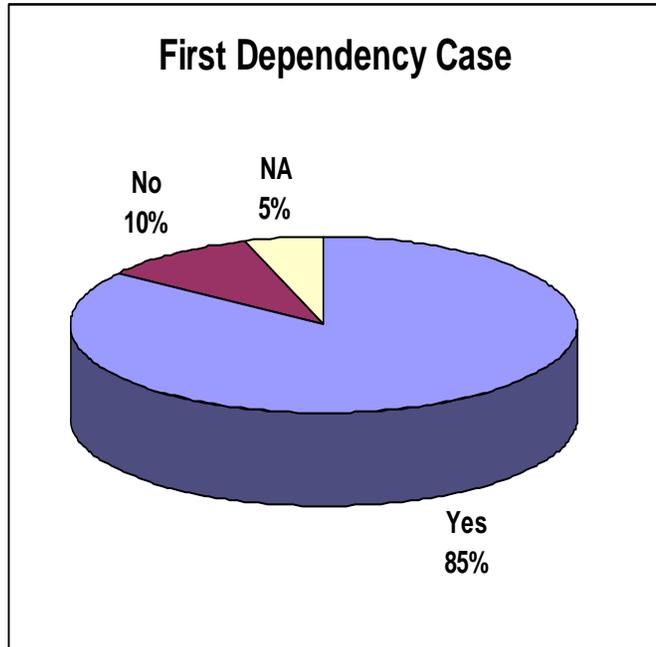
At the conclusion of Dependency 101, parents 1) rated the same nine statements; 2) rated four components of Dependency 101: video presentation, explanation of professionals' roles in the dependency process, VP's stories, and the written materials on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 – *Not at all helpful* to 3 – *Very helpful*; and 3) answered three open-ended questions.

Evaluation Results

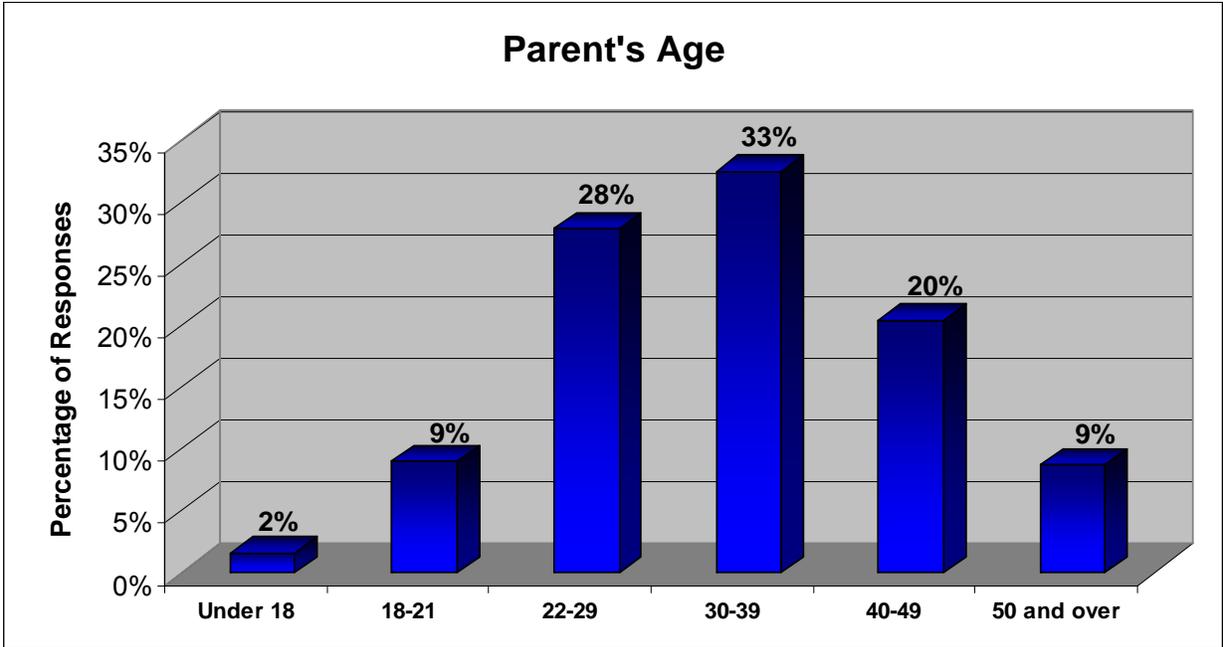
The following sections present the results from the demographic questionnaire, the nine pre and post-Dependency 101 statements, the Dependency 101 components, and the three open-ended questions.

Parent Demographics

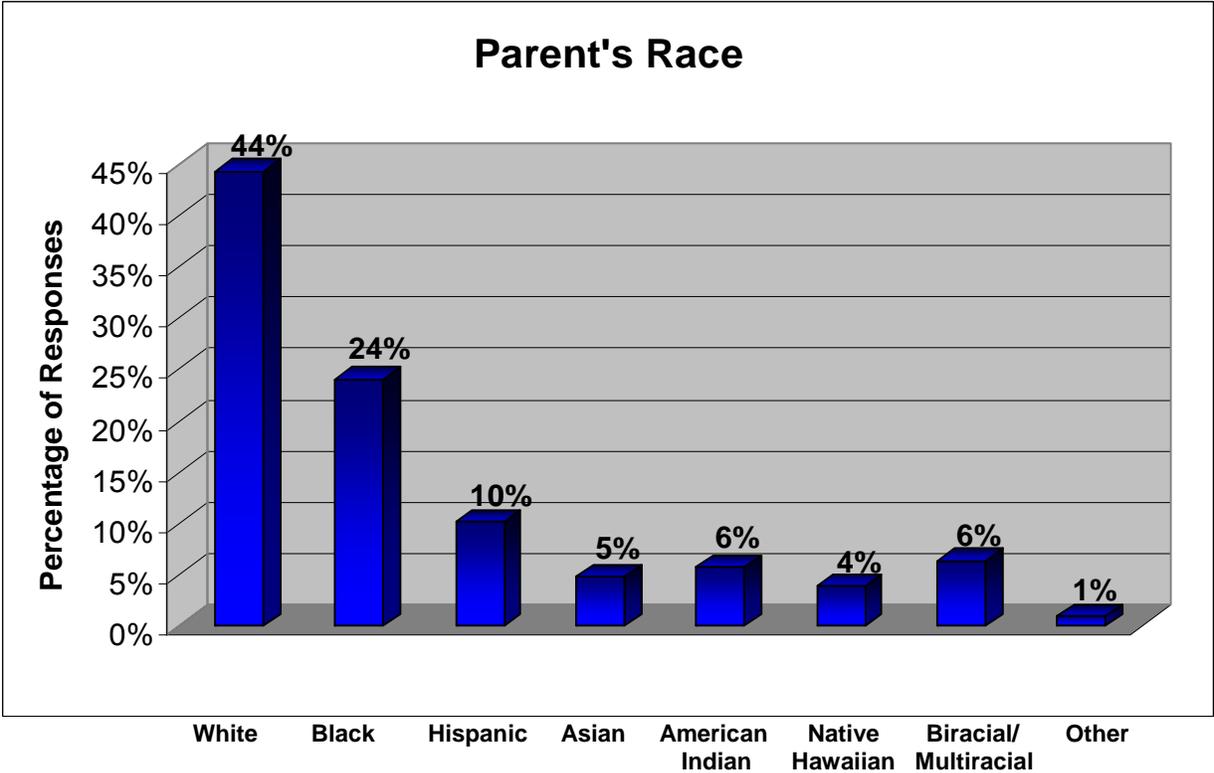
Parents indicated whether this was their first dependency case. Eighty-five percent of participants indicated that this was indeed their first dependency case, while 10 percent indicated that they had been previously involved in the dependency system. An additional 5 percent of participants were attending the program in a support role and were not parties to a current dependency case. These individuals are not included in the subsequent demographic information.



Gender and age information was collected from each parent. For the entire sample, 64 percent of parents were female and 36 percent were male.



The age of the participating parents ranged from under 18 to more than 50, with 2 percent under 18 years of age, 9 percent 18-21 years, 28 percent 22-29 years, 33 percent 30-39 years, 20 percent 40-49 years, and 9 percent indicating they were 50 years of age or older.



The self-identified race of parents was similar to the racial make-up of dependency cases in King County. Forty-four percent of parents indicated that they were White or Caucasian, 24 percent indicated they were Black or African American, 10 percent identified that they were Hispanic or Latino, 6 percent indicated they were Biracial/Multiracial, 6 percent identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 5 percent identified as Asian or Asian American, 4 percent indicated they were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 1 percent indicated that they were some other race or ethnicity.

Parent Perceptions

Overwhelmingly, parents' perceptions of CPS and the juvenile dependency system shifted significantly from pre to post-Dependency 101. On average, significant changes in perceptions occurred for eight of the nine statements. See Table 1 for the average response value for each attitude statement. Increasing values from pre to post-Dependency 101 indicate more agreement with the statement, while decreasing values indicate less agreement—suggesting that participants thought much more positively about the juvenile dependency system after participating in Dependency 101. Note that for one question, “I feel like I am the only one that is involved with CPS,” the change is negative, but it is actually in the preferred direction (i.e., the goal of P4PP is to reduce feelings of being alone).

TABLE 1: Average Pre and Post-Dependency 101 Responses			
Question	Pre-Dependency 101 Average	Post-Dependency 101 Average	Average Change
Trust in CPS			
I believe my family will get help we really need from CPS.	3.08	3.44	0.36*
I feel like I can trust CPS to be fair and see my side of things.	2.74	3.19	0.45*
I think things will get better for my child(ren) because CPS is involved.	2.91	3.30	0.39*
CPS is not out to get me.	3.24	3.48	0.24*
Awareness of Issues			
I realize I need some help to make sure my kids have what they need.	3.79	3.96	0.17*
There were definitely some problems in my family that CPS saw.	3.30	3.45	0.15*
Understanding Roles			
I understand the roles of the professionals involved in the child welfare system.	3.59	3.99	0.40*
Process Control			
I believe there are things I can do so that the Court will return my children to me.	4.47	4.56	0.09
Feeling Alone			
I feel like I am the only one that is involved with CPS.	2.17	2.02	-0.15*

* = $p \leq .05$ ¹

Despite P4PP's success in significantly changing the perceptions of eight of the nine statements, Dependency 101 did not significantly change parents' responses to the statement, "I believe there are things I can do so that the Court will return my children to me." The pre to post-Dependency 101 change was in the preferred direction however (i.e., increase).

¹ Researchers typically consider findings statistically significant if the differences between the mediated and non-mediated groups were unlikely to have occurred due to chance alone. For this assessment, results are considered significant when $p \leq .05$.

Perceptions and Gender

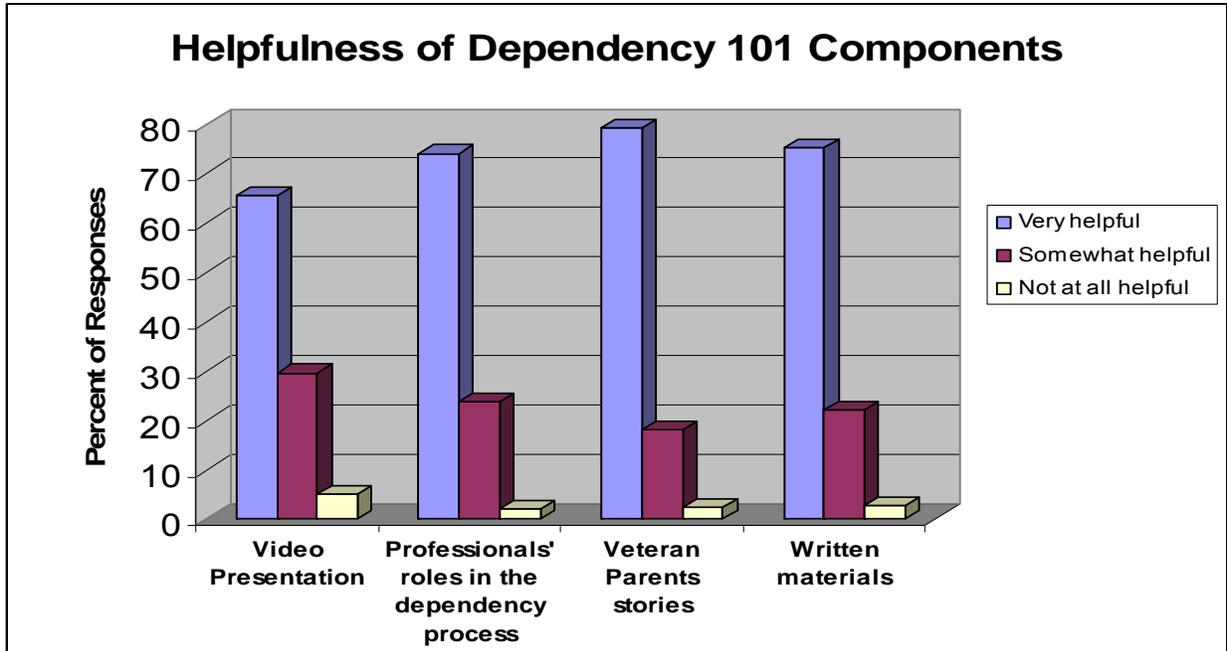
Parent perceptions of the nine statements were further analyzed to examine whether pre to post-Dependency 101 changes varied across gender. For the most part, the increases were consistent for males and females—with the exception of one statement. Females significantly decreased their post-Dependency 101 perceptions of the statement, “I feel like I am the only one that is involved with CPS.” Males, on the other hand, did not exhibit the same decrease. This finding suggests that, following Dependency 101, men are more likely than women to perceive themselves as alone in their involvement with the juvenile dependency system.

Perceptions and Race

Parent perceptions of the nine statements were also analyzed for differences across race. When examining race alone, Black parents’ and non-Black parents’ perceptions did not differ in the amount of increase from pre to post-Dependency 101; however, differences emerged when examining gender and race together. In particular, Black females did not significantly change their perceptions of the statement, “I think things will get better for my child(ren) because CPS is involved” after attending Dependency 101. Also, non-Black males and Black females did not significantly change their perception of the statement, “There were definitely some problems in my family that CPS saw.” This finding suggests that different groups can approach and engage with Dependency 101 in different ways.

Perceptions of Dependency 101 Components

For each of the Dependency 101 components, 95 percent of parents indicated they were either somewhat or very helpful. As indicated in the graph below, parents found the VPs’ stories as the most helpful component and the video presentation the least helpful.



Open-Ended Responses

Parents answered three open-ended questions regarding what they liked about Dependency 101, what more they might have wanted to know about the dependency process, and what they thought might have needed improvement. Several re-occurring themes mentioned by parents are highlighted below. Each question and the corresponding themes are listed below.

What are one or two things you learned from attending Dependency 101?

All parents indicated that they learned at least one thing from Dependency 101. The most common responses included:

- Being proactive and resilient (16 percent)
- Awareness that they are not alone (11 percent)
- Keeping documentation (8 percent)
- Understanding roles of professionals (8 percent)
- Communicating with involved parties (6 percent)
- Having a positive attitude (6 percent)
- Understanding CPS is not out to get them (5 percent)
- Understanding dependency process (5 percent)
- Importance of participation in and compliance with services (4 percent)
- Taking personal responsibility (3 percent)

What else would you like to know about the dependency process?

Nineteen percent of parents indicated that Dependency 101 had answered all of their questions. Other parents indicated that there are several areas of the dependency process they would like to learn more about. Specifically, parents wanted to know more about:

- How the dependency process works (6 percent)
- Additional services that may be helpful (6 percent)
- Timeliness issues (i.e., how long until getting children back & closing case) (4 percent)
- Anything that will help get their children back (4 percent)

In what ways, if any, could the Dependency 101 class be improved?

Thirty percent of parents believed that Dependency 101 did not need any improvement. The remaining parents made several suggestions for areas of improvement:

- More time to cover materials and ask/answer questions (10 percent)
- Allow parents to discuss their own cases (with an understanding of confidentiality) (2 percent)
- More VPs (2 percent)
- Discuss other topics besides drugs and alcohol (1 percent)
- More explanation of the system and roles within system (1 percent)

Recommendations for the Parents for Parents Program

In addition to its successes, Dependency 101 has areas for potential improvement. Using the pre and post-Dependency 101 statements, as well as the open-ended responses, several recommendations can be offered. Specifically, the P4PP should consider the following:

Increase focus on instilling a sense of control

Reassuring parents that they have control over their dependency cases may encourage them to be proactive toward reaching case plan goals. In addition, some parents may feel a sense of powerlessness in the juvenile dependency system. More focus on parental empowerment may lead to a more positive relationship between a parent and CPS.

Provide additional time for questions and answers

Overall, parents would have liked Dependency 101 to be longer. Increasing the length of Dependency 101 would allow for more dependency process and VP discussion, as well as more time for parents to ask questions and have them answered.

Broaden the scope of services discussed

Some parents attending Dependency 101 indicated that they would like to know about more services other than those reviewed in class. The discussion of services should go beyond drug and alcohol services to more broadly address the range of barriers parents may face in reunifying with their children. The Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System data tracks the removal reason for children in care. In Washington in 2009, only ten percent of children were removed due to parental alcohol abuse, while twenty-seven percent of children were removed for parental drug abuse. The majority of cases had other allegations such as general neglect (sixty-four percent), caretaker inability to cope (eleven percent), parent incarceration (seven percent), or physical abuse (fifteen percent). Discussing other issues (i.e., domestic violence, mental health, etc.) may help parents feel more engaged in the process because they find the information relevant to their case.

Create an outline or flow chart of the juvenile dependency case process

Providing an outline or flow chart listing key hearings, when these hearings are likely to occur, and what will be addressed at these hearings may help parents better understand case progression. Further, providing an explanation to the parents as to typical hearing progress may be necessary. For example, explaining that judges will be reviewing their case plan compliance

and progress toward goals at review hearings may help parents to set their own goals for success.

Increase father engagement

Engaging fathers in juvenile dependency cases leads to increases in reunifications (Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008; Wood & Russell, 2011) and decreases in time to reunification (e.g., Coakley, 2008; Malm et al.). Some dependency decision-makers view fathers as afterthoughts, potential threats to the safety of the children (O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thorton, 2005), and impediments to case progression (Malm et al.). Given the potential for these pre-dispositions and the evidence that father engagement can help achieve reunification, it is important that the P4PP continue to focus on father engagement as a goal.

Recommendations for Broader Systems Change

Enhance Discussion of Key Issues

One of the issues identified by parents in the P4PP process evaluation was that parents would like more information about the dependency process, including when they could get their children back. Enhancing discussion at early court hearings could provide parents with much of this information. There are resources available to help ensure thorough discussion at the hearings.² The Model Court Liaison can assist the court in determining what tools are available.

Make Referrals to Dependency 101

It is unclear at this time if professional stakeholders are recommending Dependency 101 to parents. While not wishing to overburden parents with additional “required” services, it may be helpful for stakeholders (e.g., social workers, judges) to refer parents to Dependency 101.

² For example, the Courts Catalyzing Change Preliminary Protective Hearing Benchcard provides a tool for judicial officers which elaborates on questions at discussion points that should be addressed (NCJFCJ, 2010).

Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, the P4PP program was well received by its participants. Parents expressed that the components of Dependency 101 (i.e., video presentation, explanation of professionals' roles in dependency process, VP stories, and written materials) were helpful. Additionally, after attending Dependency 101, parents indicated that they felt more educated about the juvenile dependency system, were less anxious about the dependency process, had a new, more positive perception of CPS, and were reassured that a support network exists. This program appears to be a useful tool in changing attitudes of participants involved in the child welfare system. It may also be helpful in improving case outcomes. Research on this is forthcoming.

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