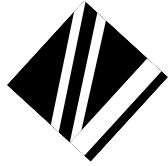


# **Colorado Parenting Time/ Visitation Project**



**Evaluation Report**



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Points of view expressed in the document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of OCSE or DHS.



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## Executive Summary

The Colorado Parenting Time Project was designed to assess whether identifying parents with visitation problems in the child support caseload and providing services aimed at resolving them improves parent-child contact and the subsequent payment of child support. Conducted in child support agencies in El Paso and Jefferson Counties, the project ultimately involved the identification of a total of 716 cases with visitation problems during May 2005 to December 2006, and their assignment to different groups for treatments of varying intensity:

- In both counties, a high-level treatment group was offered informal facilitation by the child access specialist (CAS), a specially trained worker at the child support agency retained with grant funds;
- In Jefferson County, a low-level treatment group was handed or mailed printed information about parenting time problems and various community resources to help parents with access problems, including free mediation and parent education services; and
- In El Paso County, an established unit within the child support agency (Parent Opportunity Project, or POP) offered noncustodial parents assistance with employment and parenting time using both facilitation and mediation techniques.

The project evaluation assessed the number and types of parents who enrolled in the project, the services they received, and the outcomes they experienced. The study had two limitations that reduced the generalizability of the results and suggest the need for further research. These limitations included the recruitment of members of the high- and low-level treatment groups in Jefferson County from different pools of cases, with low-level cases being drawn disproportionately from cases being heard at the court for non-payment problems, and the provision of some level of in-person assistance with access and visitation to parents in every group — including the low-level treatment group, which was only supposed to get printed information.

## Key Outcome Findings

**Child support payments increased significantly following program enrollment for all groups with those with and without parenting plans showing identical payment patterns.**

Six, 12, and 18 months following program enrollment, the child support payment rate was significantly higher for cases in every group: those in the group that received facilitation services, those that did not participate in facilitations, those in the low-level treatment group that got



printed information, and those in POP. Those who produced parenting plans exhibited increases in payment that were identical to those who attempted but failed to produce parenting plans. One interpretation of these results is that payment patterns are unrelated to the provision of access services. Another interpretation is that payments increased because members of every treatment group minimally had an opportunity to talk about their access problems with someone at child support.

**Increases in child support payment tracked with enforcement activity.**

Payments rose significantly for cases in every group that had been subject to a driver's license suspension and/or a contempt action initiated in the 12 months following enrollment in the program. Among cases without such enforcement activity, payments were only significantly higher for cases in the low-level treatment group. Since the CAS recruited many of the cases in the low-level treatment group at court hearings dealing with nonpayment, they tended to enter the project with high levels of enforcement activity that had already been initiated.

**Contact with children and parental relationships improve over time, and are significantly better for those who reach agreements and develop parenting plans in facilitation.**

A comparison of parent reports of parental relationships and parent-child contact patterns in the months prior to and following enrollment in the project suggests that all groups experience improvements over time. Parents in the high-level treatment group who were able to generate parenting plans in facilitation sessions reported the most substantial increases in contact with children and improved relationships.

**Views of the child support agency are significantly better among parents who produce parenting plans, as compared with their counterparts who fail to reach agreements.**

While project participation *per se* did not lead to improvements in the image of the child support agency with parents in the high- and low-treatment groups reporting similar views, parents who were successful in producing parenting plans reported holding more favorable views than their counterparts who attempted but failed to reach such agreements.

**Key Findings on Enrollment, Participation, and Services**

**It is challenging to get both child support staff to identify noncustodial parents with problems and parents to come forward.**

Noncustodial parents are frequently skeptical of an offer of help with visitation from the child support agency. Child support workers recognize the value of identifying parents with problems and making referrals for help, but initially worried that the time spent on access and visitation issues would affect case processing time frames. Administrators concede that while the project was a "good start," addressing visitation issues at the child support agency represents a "cultural change" that will require more time and effort.



**Most parents who disclose parenting-time problems are unmarried, employed full time, and have extremely low incomes.**

Two-thirds of parents who disclosed visitation problems had never been married to the other parent. Half were high school graduates, and three-quarters were employed on a full-time basis. Despite the prevalence of full-time employment, 20 percent had personal incomes that fell below \$10,000 per year. A quarter reported incomes that fell between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per year; 16 percent had incomes that exceeded \$30,000. The self-sufficiency wage in Jefferson County in 2004 was \$18,774 for a single adult and \$34,679 for an adult and a preschooler.

**It is difficult to deliver services to noncustodial parents who say that they have problems with visitation, the chief barrier being the refusal of many custodial parents to cooperate.**

Only 37 and 30 percent of noncustodial parents scheduled for high-level treatment *were served* in Jefferson and El Paso, respectively. In each county, 5 to 15 percent were excluded due to safety considerations such as domestic violence. The primary reason why the remaining cases did not receive facilitation services was because the custodial parent refused to respond or cooperate (70%). Another 30 percent of cases that were eligible to receive services did not get facilitation because the noncustodial parent failed to respond or follow through. Custodial parents were significantly less likely to cooperate with efforts to improve parenting time when parental relationships were characterized as conflicted, and/or the other parent lived further away, did not see the children regularly, and alleged visitation denial.

**Printed information on access is perceived to be helpful to many parents.**

Two-thirds of interviewed parents in the low-level treatment group who received printed materials on access and visitation reported using the information to set up contact with the other parent, make visits go better, and keep track of visits. Only a quarter (23%) reported calling any of the referral resources that were provided. Nearly all characterized the information as useful.

**Facilitation services are effective ways to solve parenting-time problems.**

Among parents who pursued facilitation services, 68 percent in Jefferson and 82 percent in El Paso produced agreements. In Jefferson, the average facilitation was conducted with both parents in an in-person format lasting 1.7 sessions and 102 minutes. In El Paso, the typical facilitation was done by telephone and took only 1.1 sessions lasting 22 minutes. While the CAS in Jefferson usually developed a standard parenting plan and filed it with the court for promulgation as a court order, the CAS in El Paso County frequently developed more individualistic write-ups that were kept as informal agreements between the parents and never entered with the court.

**Interviewed parents reported high levels of satisfaction with facilitation and mediation.**





Nearly three-quarters of interviewed parents who participated in facilitation reported being “very” (40%) or “somewhat” (31%) satisfied with the help they received. Those who participated in mediation were also satisfied, with 74 percent of members of the high-level treatment group and 84 percent of low-level treatment group characterizing themselves as very or somewhat satisfied.

**Substantial proportions of parents will use mediation services if they are free and parent education services if they are required by the court.**

Half of interviewed parents in the low-level treatment group in Jefferson County reported meeting with a mediator to talk about parenting time, and a similar proportion reported attending a class dealing with co-parenting. Jefferson County offered parents in the child support caseload free mediation services; the court required parents who wanted to file a parenting plan to attend a free class on co-parenting.

**It was rare for parents to go to court about parenting time, and those who did reported a good deal of dissatisfaction.**

Only a small fraction of parents in each county (14% to 19%) reported that they had gone to court or were scheduled to go about parenting time. While the most common outcome was getting a parenting time plan, about half were told to go to mediation or a parent education class, or had their case rescheduled. Nearly half reported being somewhat or very dissatisfied with their court experiences.

**Conclusions**

The Colorado Parenting Time Project reveals that child support agencies can incorporate specialized staff to help parents with visitation problems. By the end of the project, administrators and line staff did not perceive their presence at the agency to compromise efficiencies and/or case processing time frames. Indeed, once they became accustomed to making referrals, staff appreciated the resource and believed that it served an important customer service function. Nevertheless, identifying parenting time problems and making referrals represents a change in culture for child support workers. It will take more time and exposure to instill these new behaviors. It will also take federal direction. Minimally, this requires allowing referral and services activities dealing with visitation to qualify for federal reimbursement.

The project revealed that parent-child contact and parental relationships improve over time, and that those who resolve their parenting time problems reap the greatest gains in access and relationships. These parents also change their views of the child support agency in significant and positive ways. On the other hand, the fact that 70 percent of cases that were eligible to be served in the project failed to receive services because the custodial parents did not respond or refused to cooperate underscores the importance of developing ways to compel participation.



One possible solution is to improve access to the courts and provide assistance with filing *pro se* actions. The threat of possible court action might convince some custodial parents to cooperate even though most cases will settle and never advance to court action.

The absence of a true, low-level treatment group that only received printed information makes it difficult to draw definite conclusions about the impact of access and visitation services on child support payments. Payments increased significantly for every group of noncustodial parents, including those who were excluded from the project or did not appear for facilitation services. While it is impossible to tie these outcomes exclusively to the provision of access and visitation services, it is relevant that the increases in payment for all project treatment groups exceeded the increases observed for the total caseload with monthly support orders in Jefferson and El Paso Counties during a comparable time period. It will take more research with more careful attention to random assignment schemes and the generation of a true control group to develop more definitive conclusions about the relationship between access services and child support payments.



## Introduction

In October 2004, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) awarded Colorado a Section 1115 demonstration and evaluation grant to explore ways of integrating access and visitation services in child support agencies. Since the inception of the child support program in 1975, access and visitation and child support have been legally distinct and the CSE program has lacked the authority to enforce visitation orders. The 2004 award to Colorado, which led to the initiation of the Colorado Parenting Time Project, represents an effort to assess whether addressing visitation problems and providing appropriate services improves subsequent child support outcomes and payments and to determine how visitation issues can best be handled by child support agencies.

The need for access and visitation services has been documented in a number of studies, many of which have been funded by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. For example, the earliest OCSE study of access and visitation, the Child Access Demonstration Projects, evaluated programs in seven states designed to address access issues. This study, completed in 1996, concluded that as many as 31 percent of parents with access orders already in place experienced complex, contentious, and long-standing problems getting to see their children (Pearson, *et al.*, 1996). In a study of Supportive Services for Noncustodial Parents, the Responsible Fatherhood Program of San Mateo County, California, 931 noncustodial parents (NCPs) mentioned having access problems to their child support workers over a 31-month period and were referred to free mediation services for an average of nearly one referral each day (Pearson, *et al.*, 2003). More recently, without any publicity, a hotline established by Legal Aid with the support of the Texas Office of the Attorney General to answer questions about access and visitation problems received 40 calls per day (10,000 per year) from men and women of all ages, races, and geographic locations (Pearson and Thoennes, 2004).

In 1997, the OCSE initiated the State Child Access and Visitation (AV) Grant Programs, which involve annual awards of \$10 million to states and territories to help support programs that further noncustodial parents' access to and visitation with their children. Using federal funds that range from \$100,000 to nearly \$1 million, states have implemented a variety of programs to help parents with access and visitation that included programs offering parent education, mediation, supervised visitation, parenting plan development, and counseling.

The limited research on the implementation and effectiveness of programs funded with AV grants has been promising. Since 1998, when AV grants supported 131 local programs that served 19,454 individuals, the program has grown to serve almost 71,000 in 2004. In addition to serving a large number of parents, AV grant programs serve a population that is definitely at risk and has few alternative problem-solving resources. The majority of AV program participants are estimated to have incomes below \$20,000 per year and 40 percent are unmarried parents who



frequently lack formal visitation rights. Finally, while the program continues to receive the majority of its referrals from the courts (30,000), referrals from child support agencies tripled between 2003 and 2004, rising from 3,600 to 14,300 (OCSE, 2005).

Two recent studies offer some clues on participant outcomes in state AV programs. One involved a review of child support payment records and telephone interviews with 254 mediation users in five states (OIG, 2002). The other study, which was conducted by the Center for Policy Research (CPR), involved interviews with 970 parents who used programs in nine states along with a review of child support records for 173 families with child support obligations (Pearson, Davis, and Thoennes, 2005). Although both studies had low response rates and lacked a non-treatment comparison group, they both concluded that the state AV programs appeared to be achieving the two most important objectives posited for them:

- Child support payments increased among participants following program participation, especially for never-married parents who paid a significantly higher proportion of what they owed. In the OIG study, 61 percent paid more child support after services and payments rose from 52 to 70 percent of what was owed. In the CPR study, payments for never-married parents rose from 59 to 79 percent of what was owed.
- One-third to one-half of noncustodial parents in every program type reported that parent-child contact increased following program participation. Supervised visitation users who typically had the lowest levels of parent-child contact reporting a significant increase in the number of days of contact.

These findings are consistent with many earlier studies that find a connection between parent-child contact and child support payment. As early as 1979, David Chambers (1979) found that fathers with little or no contact with their children after divorce paid only about 34 percent of their child support, while fathers in regular contact paid 85 percent. A decade later, Judith Seltzer (1991) found that two-thirds of parents with frequent contact paid child support, while only one-fifth of those with no contact made payments. Most recently, the U.S. Bureau of Census (2003) reported that 77.1 percent of parents with joint custody or visitation rights paid at least some child support, compared with 55.8 percent of their counterparts without visitation rights or joint custody.

To better ensure that parents in the child support system who have access and visitation problems are identified and helped, the OCSE included in its annual grant program for 2004 a priority area specifically dedicated to “designing, implementing and testing” an access and visitation program aimed at providing services to those with an explicit complaint related to child access. In 2005, the OCSE included a grant priority aimed at reducing adversarial proceedings in cases that involve children born out of wedlock and listed as the possible strategies, “providing



mediation services for low-income parents.” The Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement responded to the OCSE’s first announcement and received a grant that began in October 1, 2004.

This is the final report for the Colorado Parenting Time Project. Like the OCSE, Colorado was interested in generating answers to a host of questions about whether and how child support agencies should address access and visitation issues (termed “parenting time” in Colorado) in their caseload. They include the following:

- How many and what types of parents in the child support caseload have AV problems?
- What types of AV problems do they have?
- At what stage of case processing do these problems surface and get detected?
- What types of AV problems can the child support agency address?
- What types of interventions by what types of personnel work best?
- What are the biggest barriers to resolving AV problems?
- What is the impact of addressing AV problems on child support payments and enforcement actions?
- What is the impact on parent-child contact patterns?
- Do AV services improve the image of the child support enforcement agency?

This report describes the services offered through the Colorado Parenting Time Project, the characteristics of parents who enrolled in the project, the procedures CPR used to assess project activities, and outcomes.





## Description of Project Setting, Partners, and Structure

The Colorado Parenting Time Project was conducted in El Paso and Jefferson counties from May 2005 to December 2006. In both counties, the goal was to generate two groups of families in the child support caseload with parenting time problems; provide high- and low-level treatments to each group, respectively; and monitor the impact of the interventions on clients, including the payment of child support.

### Project Setting

Jefferson and El Paso counties are located on the Front Range of Colorado. Jefferson County is adjacent to Denver and falls within the Denver Metropolitan Area. El Paso County is located approximately 70 miles south of Denver and consists of the city of Colorado Springs and its surroundings.

Both counties have populations of approximately one-half million that are heavily comprised of non-Hispanic whites (77% in Jefferson and 68% in El Paso). The chief ethnic and racial minority group in both counties is Hispanics, which comprise an identical 12.8 percent of the population. The African-American population is negligible in Jefferson (0.84%) and comprises 6.1 percent of the population in El Paso. Nearly all adults in both counties are high school graduates (93.1% versus 91.9%), and fewer than 10 percent have less than a high school diploma (6.9% versus 9.1%). At least a third of the adult population has a college degree (38.8% versus 33.7%).

In 2005, median household and family incomes for residents of Jefferson County were \$60,944 and \$73,355, respectively. For El Paso County residents, median household and family incomes in 2005 were \$50,714 and \$61,719, respectively. The percent of families with children under 18 who had incomes that fell below the poverty level was 8.2 percent in Jefferson and 14.6 percent in El Paso. Poverty was a much bigger problem in both counties for families with a female householder and children under 18. In Jefferson, 24.6 percent of such families had incomes that fell below the poverty level. In El Paso, 44.8 percent of female-headed families with minor children were impoverished. The 2005 unemployment rate in Jefferson County was 6 percent; in El Paso it was 6.8 percent.

### Project Partners

In both counties, the project involved child support agencies and the local courts. In El Paso County, child support services are privatized and the county Department of Human Services contracts with Policy Studies Inc. (PSI) for services. In Jefferson County, child support services are provided by the Division of Child Support Enforcement of the Jefferson County Department of Human Services. Visitation matters are handled by the district courts in both counties.



In addition to child support agencies and courts, the project involved the active involvement of other community entities. For example, both counties also made arrangements for the provision of free mediation services in cases that could not be resolved using informal dispute resolution procedures by project personnel. In Jefferson County, this service was provided by Jefferson County Mediation Services. In El Paso County, mediation services were provided by mediators affiliated with the Office of Dispute Resolution of the Colorado Judicial Department.

Both counties also arranged for interested project participants to attend free classes aimed at helping parents to communicate with one another and avoid conflict. In El Paso, these classes were offered by the Urban League. In Jefferson County, the child access specialist offered a class to interested parents on a monthly basis.

Finally, each county made some arrangement for noncustodial parents to obtain information needed to file legal actions on visitation in a self-represented manner. In El Paso County, interested project participants were referred to classes on *pro se* filings offered every other month by an attorney for Colorado Legal Services. In Jefferson County, interested project participants were told about a monthly class on family law offered at the Denver Department of Human Services.

## **Staffing**

Both counties retained a specialized worker known as a child access specialist (CAS) to help identify parents with parenting time problems, coordinate service delivery with child support staff and the courts, deliver a range of services to interested parents, refer parents to a range of community-based service providers, and collect evaluative information. In Jefferson County, the child access specialist had extensive experience as a social services worker and mediator. In El Paso County, the child access specialist was an experienced child support worker. At the start of the project, the Office of Dispute Resolution (ODR) of the Colorado Judicial Department conducted a two-day training program on facilitation and mediation for child access specialists and other child support personnel in the participating counties. The goal of the training was to set the tone of non-adversarial dispute resolution as the key project intervention and to distinguish informal facilitation from mediation. The child access specialists also attended a two-day training program for a parent education curriculum developed by the ODR that emphasizes how to avoid conflict and engage in successful co-parenting.

## **Identifying Project Cases**

The goal of the recruitment effort was to identify cases in the child support caseload with parenting time problems at all stages of case processing. Establishment workers were asked to flag parents with access and visitation problems during conferences and hearings to establish





child support orders. Enforcement workers were instructed to identify parents with access and visitation problems during phone calls and visits concerning nonpayment and the initiation of various enforcement actions. Child support workers, attorneys, and hearing officers were encouraged to flag still other cases at court during contempt proceedings, modifications, and other judicial actions surrounding order establishment and enforcement. Finally, the receptionist at both agencies had a stack of screening questionnaires about access and visitation problems and was instructed to distribute these to all custodial and noncustodial parents who came to the office for any reason.

Parents could enter the project by completing the one-page screening form and returning it to the receptionist for further contact by the CAS. Alternatively, child support workers could complete the screening form about noncustodial parents in their caseload and convey the completed form to the CAS for contact and project enrollment. The screening form elicited contact information, a limited amount of demographics, and the nature of the parenting time problem.

### **Screening Procedures**

An attempt was made to identify and eliminate cases from the project where parent-child contact might imperil the safety of children or the other parent. The CAS used the identifiers about the noncustodial parent supplied on the one-page screening form to search automated judicial (ICON) and child support (ACSES) databases for information regarding current restraining orders, child abuse filings, and a non-disclosure flag indicating domestic violence is a problem. Cases were eliminated from the project if domestic violence or child abuse was an active issue as evidenced by a current restraining order or child abuse filing. Cases were also dropped if they involved foster or relative caretakers. Finally, Jefferson County restricted the pool of project cases to intrastate matters and eliminated cases if one parent lived outside of the state and if either parent had been incarcerated.

### **The Interventions**

A key goal of the project was to assess how parents with similar visitation problems react to different interventions by the child support agency designed to help them resolve their parenting time issues. Can parenting-time problems be addressed through modest forms of assistance? Do they require more elaborate efforts? To answer this question, two levels of intervention were developed. The low-level treatment was designed to test the effectiveness of distributing printed information on visitation problems and resources available in the community. The high-level treatment involved the offer of more extensive in-person services, the principal one being informal facilitation by a specialized worker at the child support agency, the CAS.



The low-level intervention was meant to involve the allocation of minimal levels of resources and staff attention by the child support agency. In Jefferson County, individuals assigned to the low-level treatment group were to receive a packet of materials created by the child access specialist that included contact information on agencies offering parenting classes and mediation services, and *pro se* forms and instructions. They were also directed to the self-help desk at the Jefferson County courthouse to obtain help with preparing and filings a *pro se* action dealing with visitation. Individuals in the low-level treatment group could obtain in-person help if they pursued the resources noted in the literature. For example, they could access free mediation at Jefferson County Mediation Services. On the other hand, they did not receive telephone or in-person help from the CAS or participate in facilitation sessions designed to resolve their visitation problems.

In El Paso County, it was impossible to generate a low-level treatment group because the county has an established unit (Parent Opportunity Project, or POP) that offers noncustodial parents assistance with employment and parenting time. Child support workers in El Paso County have come to rely on POP; the privatized child support vendor, PSI, includes POP services in its bid and POP is part of the services outlined in its contract with the county. POP routinely refers willing parents to voluntary mediation using a mediator provided by the Office of Dispute Resolution and paid for by the parties. POP clients who generate a mediation agreement are also responsible for filing it with the court and paying relevant filing fees. Those who refuse to mediate or fail to reach an agreement in mediation are referred to a free, bimonthly class on parenting time for unrepresented NCPs conducted by Colorado Legal Services. POP also offers custodial parents a variety of referrals including a free, bimonthly class on parenting-time for unrepresented custodial parents (CPs) conducted by the El Paso County Bar Association and a low-cost, multi-session, parent education class conducted by the Women's Resource Center and the Center on Fathering. POP refers parents to low-cost supervised visitation or exchange services offered by Court Appointed Special Advocates. And for those needing assistance with employment, POP has established referral and service arrangements with Goodwill Industries.

In El Paso County, eligible parents were either assigned to high-level treatment for facilitation services by the CAS or to the Parent Opportunity Project.

### **High-Level Treatment Group Interventions**

In both Jefferson and El Paso counties, individuals assigned to the high-level treatment group were contacted by the CAS for further assessment, the development of a case plan, treatment using facilitation and/or mediation techniques, and referral to appropriate services offering assistance with *pro se* filings and other litigation resources if mediation and other nonadversarial techniques were unsuccessful. Both counties obtained pre-signed judicial letters to use in order to encourage an uncooperative parent to participate in a facilitation or mediation attempt in



cases where parenting time was a problem but domestic violence and/or child abuse was not. Both counties also arranged for agreed-upon parenting time plans generated by parents in the high-level treatment group to be incorporated into existing paternity and child support orders in order to avoid a separate filing and the payment of the \$175 filing fee.

**El Paso County:** Although the work performed by the CAS in El Paso County was similar to the work POP staff do with clients referred to them, the two groups experienced some differences in treatment. One important difference is that the CAS attempted to facilitate the parenting time problem and develop a parenting plan on a consensual basis at the child support office and only used formal mediation with a mediator from the Office of Dispute Resolution when the informal approach did not work. Another difference was that formal mediation was provided at no cost to members of the high-treatment group, while POP participants paid their own mediation fees. Still another difference was that the CAS took any agreement generated by the parents in a facilitated or mediated setting and entered it with the court without the parties having to pay a fee or make a separate court filing.

**Jefferson County:** The high-treatment group in Jefferson County experienced many different forms of treatment than their counterparts in the low-treatment group. Using telephone or in-person formats, the CAS gathered relevant information from each parent about the nature and duration of the parenting time problem and explored their interest in participating in various interventions. Next, the CAS conducted an in-office facilitation session, the objective of which was to resolve the parenting time issues and generate a parenting-time agreement. If the parties reached an agreement and signed it, the CAS took the agreement to the court, where it was approved by the judge and filed with the child support order. The goal was to file the parenting agreement under the same docket number as the child support order and avoid a filing fee. Jefferson County judges require all parents who receive a court-ordered parenting time agreement to attend a court-approved parent education class. On a monthly basis, the CAS offered parents a one-session, three-hour class that dealt with avoiding conflict and successful co-parenting.

If the two parents were unable to reach an agreement using informal facilitation, the CAS referred them to a community-based mediation program that offers free mediation services. If mediation proved to be unsuccessful or one parent refused to participate, the CAS referred the willing participant to legal resources for assistance in filing a parenting time motion with the court.

The following shows the range of services available to high-level treatment group parents in each county.



### El Paso County

- CAS assessment of the problem with both parents by telephone or in-person;
- Informal facilitation by the CAS either face-to-face or by telephone;
- Incorporation of parenting plan generated through the facilitation and/or mediation with existing child support orders and entry as a court order without a separate filing or filing fee;
- CAS provides the *pro se* filing packet and application for a filing fee waiver;
- Referral for voluntary or court-ordered mediation at the Office of Dispute Resolution paid for by the project;
- Referral to a free, bimonthly class on parenting time for unrepresented NCPs conducted by Colorado Legal Services;
- Referral to a free, bimonthly class on parenting time for unrepresented CPs conducted by the El Paso County Bar Association;
- Referral to a free, three-hour class on the impact of conflict on children and the importance of parental cooperation conducted by the CAS on a monthly or bimonthly basis;
- Referral to low-cost, multi-session, parent education classes conducted by the Women's Resource Center and the Center on Fathering;
- Referral to low-cost supervised visitation or exchange services offered by Court Appointed Special Advocates;
- Referral to the El Paso County Bar Association for free/reduced-cost legal assistance with parenting time filings and forms;
- Referral to Goodwill Industries for assistance with employment; and
- Case management and follow-up calls by the CAS to monitor services and compliance.

### Jefferson County

- Assessment of the problem with both parents by the CAS using telephone or in-person techniques;
- Informal facilitation by the CAS in a face-to-face setting;
- Conveyance of an agreement reached by two parents to the court for judicial approval and promulgation as a court order without the need for a separate legal filing and fee;
- Telephone monitoring by the CAS to gauge parental compliance with parenting plan agreements;
- Referral for voluntary or court-ordered mediation using a mediator provided by Jefferson County Mediation Services Program at no cost;
- Referral to a free, single-session, three-hour class on the impact of conflict on children and the importance of parental cooperation conducted by CASA on a monthly basis;
- Referral to low-cost supervised visitation or exchange services offered by a local service provider not yet identified;
- Referral to a free class on parenting time offered by the Denver Bar Association; and
- Case management (including follow-up telephone calls) by the CAS to monitor the delivery of services.



## Evaluation Design and Methodology

The evaluation conducted by the Center for Policy Research (CPR) was designed to assess the number and types of parents that enrolled in the project, the interventions and services they received, and the outcomes they experienced. It involved both qualitative and quantitative components.

**Group Assignment:** A quasi-random assignment methodology was developed to generate two groups of equivalent cases in each county that would be subject to the higher- and lower-level treatments. In Jefferson County, cases with Social Security numbers for the noncustodial parent that ended in 0-2 were designated to be assigned to the low-level treatment group, while those with Social Security numbers ending in higher digits were designated to be assigned to the high-level treatment group. In El Paso County, clients with child support case numbers ending in 0-3 were assigned to the POP group and high-level treatment group cases had child support case numbers ending in 4-9.

**Instruments for Group Enrollment and Monitoring:** CPR designed a variety of data collection forms to keep track of the individuals who were recruited and enrolled in the project and the services they received. They were:

- **Brief Intake Form:** This one-page form, with variants for custodial and noncustodial parents, asked parents whether they were having problems with parenting time, the nature of their problems, their duration, and whether the parent was interested in receiving help. Parents who completed the form (or child support staff) were also asked to indicate the source of referral to the project. This form was completed for cases in the high- and low-level treatment groups.
- **Consent Form:** This one-page form outlined the range of services that parents might receive in both the high- or low-level treatment groups and granted the release of contact information and child support records to researchers for evaluation purposes. It elicited contact information for each participant and a secondary contact.
- **The Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES) and the Integrated Colorado Online Network (ICON) Screening Form:** This form recorded the results of checks of automated databases maintained by the Judicial Department and the Child Support Enforcement Agency. The major objective of these searches was to identify domestic violence and child abuse problems that would preclude the delivery of access and visitation services. The records were searched for evidence of a current or past restraining order, child abuse filing, and conviction of a sex offense. The automated court record was also checked for evidence of a parenting time order and/or an allocation of



parental responsibilities. A legal and criminal history check was conducted for all cases in the high- and low-level treatment groups.

- **NCP Assessment by Child Access Specialist:** This two-page form elicited information on the nature of the parenting time problem, the number of children involved and their ages, the marital status of the parents, and the distance between the homes of the NCP and the children. The form also elicited demographic information on the NCP. Finally, NCPs were asked a variety of questions regarding domestic violence problems and the need for a variety of social, legal, and health services. This form was completed for cases in the high-level treatment group.
- **CP Assessment by Child Access Specialist:** The assessment for custodial parents mirrored the assessment for noncustodial parents and elicited information on the marital status of the parents; the children they have in common; perceived problems with parenting time; demographics; financial and psycho-social stability; domestic violence; and interest in a variety of social, legal, and health services. This form was completed for cases in the high-level treatment group.
- **Case Plan:** On this form, the child access specialist indicated the recommended plan of action for families in the high-level treatment group. It identified recommended services such as facilitation, mediation, parenting classes, and case management. The child access specialist also used this form to record the actual services delivered and the reasons for case closure.
- **Facilitator Form:** This form was completed by the child access specialist following a facilitation session with parents in the high-level treatment group. The form indicated whether the session was conducted jointly with both parents or separately. It also indicated whether the format was in-person or by telephone. The CAS used the form to record the topics that were discussed and whether they were resolved. Finally, the form indicated the result of the session, agreements that were reached, and whether the parenting plan was filed with the court.
- **Immediate Case Outcome Form:** This form was completed by the child access specialist for all cases in both the high- and low-level treatment group. It indicated whether the case was appropriate for high- and low-level treatment, and the ultimate disposition, including the development of a parenting plan that was submitted to the court. The outcome form also elicited information on the incidence and reasons for case exclusion.

**Instruments to Measure Longer-Term Outcomes:** The goal of the assessment of longer-term outcomes was to gauge whether project participation led to changes in parent-child contact



levels, parental relationships, and child support payments. Another objective was to assess the helpfulness of various interventions and changes in perceptions of the child support agency.

- **Follow-up Telephone Questionnaire:** A follow-up survey of project participants was administered to custodial and noncustodial parents in the low- and high-level treatment groups six months after project intake. As part of the close-ended, fixed-choice questionnaire, respondents were asked about the major types of assistance that they might have received and their utility. Respondents were also asked to assess the frequency of parent-child contact before and after project participation; changes in the relationship with the other parent since project participation; and changes in child support payment including factors that might explain nonpayment such as unemployment, disability, or new financial obligations. Finally, respondents were asked a few demographic questions and a question on whether their view of the child support agency had changed since participating in the project.
- **Child Support Data Collection Form:** Objective information on child support outcomes for all project cases in every treatment group came from the automated child support enforcement system (ACSES). The set of data extracted for each project participant included information on child support order levels, dates of order establishment, and whether orders were established with the participation of the noncustodial parent or by default. Monthly payment information was extracted for each noncustodial parent for 18 months prior to their enrollment in the project and up to 18 months following enrollment. The form also recorded whether there was evidence of major enforcement actions being taken prior to and following project intake including wage withholding, credit bureau reporting, driver's license suspension, and contempt actions.

**Data Collection:** All forms that recorded project intake and participation that were completed by participants and/or the child access specialist were conveyed to the Center for Policy Research for data entry and analysis.

The interview conducted six months following project enrollment was done by professional telephone interviewers at the Public Opinion Laboratory (POL) of Northern Illinois University, using its computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system. POL has conducted many prior telephone surveys dealing with access and visitation issues and is familiar with access and visitation issues and the challenges associated with reaching custodial and noncustodial parents in the child support system to talk about their access and visitation problems and experiences. All respondents received a \$20 gift certificate from King Soopers or McDonald's. Those who could not be reached by telephone were sent a postcard inviting them to phone POL using a toll-free number. They were reminded about the \$20 incentive.



Interviewers made up to 10 attempts to contact targeted program participants and conduct telephone interviews. POL attempted to conduct interviews with 480 individual and reached 186, for a completion rate of 39 percent. The telephone interview took an average of 22 minutes to complete. The refusal rate was 5 percent. As in past studies, the major barrier to completion of the interviews was a disconnected or wrong telephone number, with 25 percent of potential respondents falling in this category. Another 23 percent resulted in no answer.

The interview response rate for the Colorado Parenting Time Project is better than many other studies of access and visitation. For example, the response rate for an OIG study on access problems was 33 percent. The higher response rate for the Colorado project is due to the relatively short amount of time elapsing between project enrollment and the administration of the following up telephone interview (*e.g.*, six months) and the use of postcard reminders to potential respondents.

The objective child support information was manually extracted from ACSES by a retired child support worker who is thoroughly familiar with the automated child support system. The worker reviewed relevant child support screens for all project cases and recorded the information on case characteristics and payments noted on the child support system.

Many questions about the utility of incorporating access and visitation services in a child support agency, workload impact on child support staff, and the best method for achieving service integration can only be answered using qualitative techniques. Accordingly, CPR researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with enforcement and establishment workers in Jefferson and El Paso counties, as well as agency administrators, court personnel, and the child access specialists retained in the two counties.

**Study Limitations:** The study has a number of limitations that should be noted at the outset. The first limitation is the fact that there are a number of pre-existing differences between those assigned to the high- and low-level treatment groups that will limit the ability to compare the two groups on outcomes related to access and child support. Such differences may reflect chance occurrences or may be the result of deviating from the quasi-random assignment that was initially planned. Table 1 below highlights a few key differences between the two groups. It indicates:

- Compared to cases in the high- and low-level treatment group, cases in the Parent Opportunity Project (POP) in El Paso include a disproportionate number of mothers requesting services. El Paso County accepted interstate cases in the project, while Jefferson County restricted enrollment to cases where both parents lived within Colorado. As a result, POP cases are also disproportionately more likely to be interstate. Finally,





POP cases were less likely than the other groups to have a monthly support order in place at project entry.

- The low-level treatment group in Jefferson County, relative to the other groups, has a high proportion of cases referred by the court.
- Relative to the other groups, the high-level treatment group has fewer cases that entered the project with a court-ordered access and visitation plan in place.

**Table 1. Selected Comparisons, by Group**

		High-level treatment	Low-level treatment	POP
★ Mother requesting services:		5%	7%	15%
	Number	(376)	(86)	(68)
★ Received referral form from court:		11%	34%	0%
	Number	(288)	(85)	(106)
★ Both parents in Colorado:		83%	95%	79%
	Number	(357)	(83)	(63)
★ Have child support order at project entry:		79%	82%	68%
	Number	(524)	(116)	(75)
★ Percent with court order on access/visitation at project entry:		19%	28%	35%
	Number	(334)	(81)	(63)

★ Chi square is significant at .05 or less.

The second limitation is that the study did not include a control site where only information was provided and no access and visitation services were offered. This limits the types of settings to which the study results can be generalized. Many child support agencies and courts provide no free, in-person services to parents with access and visitation problems. In the present study, both counties provided a significant number of services to non-project cases. In El Paso County, all cases requesting help received facilitation and/or mediation services. In Jefferson County, the low-level treatment group had the opportunity to talk with the child access specialist, was given the option of free mediation, and all parents were required to attend free parent education classes before the court would hear their case.

A third limitation is the fact that detailed information is typically only available for the high-level treatment group that chose to participate in services. The low-level group and the high-level group not participating in services did not complete the full assessment.

A fourth limitation is the fact that those parents who could be reached for a follow-up telephone interview were not a cross-section of all parties assigned to the high- and low-level treatment groups. For example, compared to all parents in the study, those with interviews included more parents who were previously married, fewer who were employed full-time, and more who lived more than 50 miles from their children.



Finally, a number of the analyses have relatively small sample sizes available. This is true in the analysis of the interview data where only high-level treatment parents who participated in services were interviewed. It is also true in the analyses that separate the high-level treatment group into those who participated in services and those who did not.

These limitations suggest that the results of this evaluation should be viewed with some caution. Before conclusions regarding the utility of services such as those described in this report can be reached, further study is needed with larger sample sizes and strict adherence to a random or quasi-random assignment of cases to high- and low-level treatment groups. On the other hand, the evaluation presents extensive information for a large number of cases in the child support system with identified parenting problems. As such, it affords unique insights on the dynamics of parenting time among parents in the child support caseload and some possible ways of addressing their concerns.



## Cases Referred and Cases Served

A total of 715 cases were referred to the CAS in El Paso and Jefferson counties from the start of project recruitment in June 2005 to its conclusion at the end of October 2006. Jefferson County generated 377 cases, or slightly more than half of the total number received (52.6%), while El Paso generated 338 referrals (47.4%). Approximately one third (31%) of referred cases in Jefferson County was assigned to a low-level treatment group and received a packet of printed materials about access and visitation. A fifth (22%) of the cases in El Paso County was assigned to the Parent Opportunity Project to receive help with parenting time and employment.

**Table 2. Case Assignment, by Site and Total**

	El Paso County (N=338)	Jefferson County (N=378)	Total (N=716)
Low-level treatment/POP	75	117	192
High-level treatment	263	260	523

After being assigned to either the high- or low-level treatment groups, cases were subjected to computerized court and child support records for evidence of domestic violence and criminal conduct. The checks were done by the CASs in each county to reduce the chance of helping a violent parent gain access to his or her children and/or other parent. Another objective was to identify cases where couples should be kept apart and facilitation should be done by telephone rather than in person.

The CAS in each county checked two computerized record systems: the Integrated Colorado Online Network (ICON) and the Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES). Although the plan was to check every case in the project, the CAS in El Paso County had difficulty in obtaining information from ICON and therefore was unable to routinely perform ICON screening checks on each case. Checks were done for 410 cases in the high- and 115 cases in the low-level treatment groups, respectively.

Table 3 shows that the incidence of current restraining orders against either parent was similar across the high- and low-level treatment groups, with 11 and 14 percent of cases in each group, respectively, showing a restraining order that was in effect. The incidence of child abuse filings and convictions for a sexual offense in the two groups was also similar. The only difference between the two groups was in the incidence of past restraining orders against either parent, which was significantly higher among cases in the low-level treatment group. It will be recalled that the CAS in Jefferson County obtained many members of the low-level treatment group at court hearings dealing with non-payment of child support.



It is relevant that only 2 to 5 percent of cases in every group had an indicator of domestic violence (NDI) on the automated child support system ACSES and that these incidence levels fell far below the incidence of current restraining orders noted on ICON. Architects of future programs should be aware of these discrepancies. Most mediation programs screen for domestic violence problems by asking each parent about it in separate and private sessions.

**Table 3. Domestic Violence and Criminal History from Court and Child Support Records, by Group ★**

	High-level treatment	Low-level treatment
Number of cases with information on computerized court or child support records	(410)	(115)
Current restraining order against either parent	11%	14%
★ ★ Past restraining order against either parent	27%	38%
NDI order on ACSES	2%	5%
Child abuse filing against NCP with child in this case	11%	13%
Parent or a child has been convicted of a sex offense	5%	6%

★ Only six POP cases had information available from computer checks.  
 ★ ★ Chi square significant at .05 or less.

Ultimately, as shown in Table 4, only about a third of the parents assigned to the high-level treatment group were contacted and served. In Jefferson County, only 97 of the 260 noncustodial parents scheduled for high-level treatment (37%) were served. In El Paso, 79 NCPs were served, which comprised 30 percent of the 263 targeted to receive high-level treatment services.

**Table 4. Services Delivered to High-Level Treatment Group, by Site**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total
Assigned to high-level treatment	263	260	523
Received services	79	97	176

There were a number of reasons why cases did not receive services. Table 5 shows that 7 to 15 percent of the NCPs in the high-level treatment group in each county (263 in El Paso and 260 in Jefferson) did not receive services because they were excluded from the project due to safety issues such as those discussed above. Jefferson County also excluded cases (7%) if the custodial parent lived outside of Colorado. A number of cases in Jefferson County were also eliminated because there were previous parenting orders in place.



**Table 5. Reasons for Exclusion of High-Level Cases, by Site and Total**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total
Percentage of all referrals excluded because:			
NCP has sex assault convictions	1%	6%	3%
NCP has violent history/convictions	6%	9%	7%
Previous parenting order in place	1%	14%	7%
NCP in jail	0%	1%	1%
CP lives out of state	0%	7%	3%
Excluded by genetic test	1%	1%	1%
Child emancipated	1%	0%	1%
Parents made own arrangements/reconciled	2%	0%	1%
Number	(263)	(260)	(523)

Once the relatively small numbers of excluded cases are removed from the analysis, it becomes apparent that the most common reason that non-excluded cases did not receive services was the custodial parent’s refusal to respond and/or cooperate. This was the case for 71 percent of the eligible, non-served cases in El Paso County and 68 percent of eligible, non-served cases in Jefferson County.

In both counties, the remaining 30 percent of eligible, non-served cases were the result of the noncustodial parent failing to cooperate, respond, and/or follow through after having requested assistance.

Table 6 shows the characteristics of 289 noncustodial parents in the high-level treatment group who requested help with their parenting time. Perhaps the most striking feature of the table is the low level of earnings reported by noncustodial parents. Despite the prevalence of full-time employment, 20 percent had personal incomes that fell below \$10,000 per year. A quarter reported incomes that fell between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per year. More than a third (38%) had incomes that were between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year. Only 16 percent reported personal incomes that exceeded \$30,000 per year. Not surprisingly, more than half of enrolled noncustodial parents reported that their income did not cover their financial needs and a third indicated that they had problems with paying child support.

Although the federal poverty level threshold for a single adult in 2004 was \$9,310, the self-sufficiency wage for a single adult in Jefferson County, Colorado, was \$18,774. This is the income needed to meet basic costs in Colorado for housing, food, health care, transportation, and taxes. The self-sufficiency wage for an adult and one preschooler was \$34,679. Although we do not know the precise family composition of noncustodial parents who enrolled in the Parenting Time Project, a substantial proportion of them clearly had income levels that placed them both below the federal poverty level and above poverty but below the self-sufficiency standard in Colorado. Overall, 19 percent of households in El Paso County and 16 percent of



households in Jefferson County had incomes that fell below the Self-Sufficiency Standard (Pearce, 2007).

**Table 6. Selected Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group**

		Total (N=289)
*Age:		
	Mean	34.9
	Median	34.0
	Range	18-65
Race/ethnic group:		
	African-American	15%
	White	53%
	Latino/Hispanic	27%
	Native American	1%
	Other	4%
*Highest educational degree:		
	None	13%
	GED	20%
	High school degree	53%
	College degree or higher	14%
Marital status with other parent:		
	Married	41%
	Never married, lived together	41%
	Never married, never lived together	18%
	Number	(230)
*Currently employed:		
	Full-time	73%
	Part-time	8%
	Work at odd jobs/pick-up jobs	4%
	Not employed	15%
*Multiple jobs:		
	Percent working more than one job	7%
Personal income:		
	Less than \$10,000 a year	20%
	Between \$10,000-\$20,000	26%
	Between \$20,000-\$30,000	38%
	Between \$30,000-\$40,000	11%
	More than \$40,000	5%



**Table 6. Selected Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group**

How well salary covers financial needs:		
	Fairly well	49%
	Not very well	39%
	Not at all	13%
*Job provides benefits:		
	Paid vacation	40%
	Sick leave	27%
	Medical	42%
	None	27%
NCP has:		
	Permanent place to live	92%
	*Driver's license and insurance	74%
	*Car that works or reliable transportation	84%
	*Family/friends nearby who can help	90%
	Health problems or disabilities	9%
	Problems with alcohol/drugs	5%
	Trouble reading or writing	4%
	Problems speaking English	2%
	*Trouble managing money	10%
	*Legal troubles	12%
	*Trouble with child support	33%

\* Chi square is significant at .09 or less.

Tables 7 through 9 consider the influence of a number of factors on the willingness of the custodial parent to participate, the noncustodial parent's failure to follow through, or the delivery of services.

Table 7 shows no statistically significant relationship between the parents' marital relationship and receiving services. However, there does appear to be a relationship between the NCP's assessment of the quality of the parents' relationship at entry to the project and the ultimate delivery of services. Almost half of those NCPs who described the relationship as fairly cooperative or only a little strained received services, compared to less than a third of the NCPs with less amiable relationships. In cases where the NCP reported the relationship to be angry or reported no contact with the CP, almost half of the CPs refused to participate in the project.



**Table 7. Parent Relationships: Cases Participating and Not Participating in Services**

★ ★ NCP describes relationship with CP as:	Cooperative/ Little strained	Angry	No contact
	NCP did not follow through on service request	15%	18%
CP refused to participate	38%	48%	51%
Parents were served	47%	34%	30%
Number	(162)	(79)	(74)
NCP reports being married to CP:	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	
NCP did not follow through on service request	10%	13%	
CP refused to participate	30%	38%	
Parents were served	60%	49%	
Number	(186)	(87)	

★ ★ Chi square is significant at .1 or less.

Table 8 shows that receiving services is also associated with a number of factors related to the access problem. NCPs were somewhat less likely to follow through in cases with disputes of long duration. Receiving services was less likely in cases where the NCP describes the problem as CP denial of contact or fighting about contact, and where the NCP reports little pre-program contact with the child.

**Table 8. Comparing Access Issues of Cases Participating and Not Participating in Services**

★ NCP report of contact with child in 6 months pre-intake:	Two visits or less	Every other month to twice a month	Weekly or more	
	NCP did not follow through on service request	19%	11%	11%
CP refused to participate	51%	33%	21%	
Parents were served	30%	56%	68%	
Number	(198)	(46)	(38)	
★ ★ NCP report on the distance between NCP and child:	< 25 miles	26-50 miles	> 50 miles	Does not know where child lives
	NCP did not follow through on service request	13%	5%	11%
CP refused to participate	29%	40%	27%	60%
Parents were served	58%	55%	62%	30%
Number	(158)	(40)	(55)	(20)
★ ★ NCP report on duration of access problems:	12 months or less	13 to 48 months	More than 48 months	
	NCP did not follow through on service request	13%	20%	22%
CP refused to participate	46%	43%	50%	
Parents were served	41%	35%	28%	
Number	(76)	(60)	(32)	
NCP reports access problems related to:	★ Visits denied		★ ★ Parental fighting	
	No	Yes	No	Yes
NCP did not follow through on service request	20%	16%	21%	15%
CP refused to participate	32%	50%	46%	39%
Parents were served	48%	34%	33%	47%
Number	(75)	(213)	(153)	(116)

★ Chi square is significant at .05 or less.

★ ★ Chi square is significant at .1 or less.





Table 9 shows that female NCPs are less apt to follow-through in pursuing services. It also suggests that CP willingness to participate in access services increases as with the NCP's education, employment, and earning level, although very few noncustodial parents had higher incomes, with only 12 reporting earnings that exceeded \$40,000 per year.

**Table 9. Comparing NCP Characteristics in Cases Participating and Not Participating in Services**

★NCP Gender:	Male	Female		
NCP did not follow through on service request	16%	31%		
CP refused to participate	44%	38%		
Parents were served	40%	31%		
Number	(317)	(16)		
★★ NCP education:	Less than high school	High school or GED	More than high school	
NCP did not follow through on service request	12%	11%	13%	
CP refused to participate	44%	34%	16%	
Parents were served	44%	56%	71%	
Number	(34)	(198)	(38)	
NCP employment:	Full-time	Part-time or pick-up jobs	Unemployed	
NCP did not follow through on service request	10%	17%	10%	
CP refused to participate	29%	38%	44%	
Parents were served	61%	45%	46%	
Number	(201)	(29)	(39)	
★★ NCP income:	\$20,000 or less	\$20,000-\$40,000	More than \$40,000	
NCP did not follow through on service request	9%	12%	0%	
CP refused to participate	40%	28%	17%	
Parents were served	50%	60%	83%	
Number	(117)	(136)	(12)	
★ Chi square is significant at .05 or less.				
★★ Chi square is significant at .1 or less.				





## Services Provided

### Facilitation

The key intervention that child access specialists provided was facilitation. This was a conference held jointly or separately with parents that was aimed at addressing the access problem and resolving it. Table 10 shows the format of facilitations that were done with 147 parents in the high-level treatment group. Although the median number of session for each case was 1.0 across both counties, facilitations were a much lengthier affair in Jefferson County. On average, they required 1.7 sessions that took an average of 102 minutes. Indeed, two cases in Jefferson County were much more extended procedures that involved up to 11 sessions. In El Paso County, half of facilitation sessions were completed in 10 minutes or less and the average session only required 22.4 minutes.

Most meetings with the child access specialists in both counties were done conjointly (74%) with the participation of both custodial and noncustodial parents. The format was more varied in Jefferson County, where parents met separately with the CAS in 20 percent of the cases and both separately and together in another 14 percent. Most sessions in Jefferson County involved in-person meetings, with only 4 percent being done by telephone. In El Paso County, on the other hand, phone formats were used exclusively in 42 percent of the cases, another 19 percent involved a mixture of telephone and in-person formats, and in-person formats were used exclusively in only 39 percent of the cases.

**Table 10. Information on the Facilitation Intervention with Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group (N=154)**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total
<b>Number of sessions held:</b>			
Mean	1.1	1.7	1.4
Median	1.0	1.0	1.0
Range	1-3	1-11	1-11
Number	(68)	(79)	(147)
<b>★Length of sessions in minutes:</b>			
Mean	22.4	102.4	71.4
Median	10.0	45.0	30.0
Range	1-90	2-630	1-630
Number	(54)	(85)	(139)
<b>★Format:</b>			
Separate sessions with parents	14%	20%	18%
Joint sessions with parents	86%	66%	74%
Both separate and joint meetings	0%	14%	8%
Number	(63)	(85)	(148)



**Table 10. Information on the Facilitation Intervention with Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group (N=154)**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total	
★ Session was:				
	In person	39%	96%	73%
	By phone	42%	0%	17%
	Both telephone and in person	19%	4%	10%
	Number	(57)	(84)	(141)
★ Chi square is significant at .05 or less.				

Table 11 shows the outcome of facilitations held with parents in the high-level treatment group in the two counties. Cases were significantly more apt to result in agreement in El Paso County (82%) as compared with Jefferson (68%), although both rates fell between the range of agreement making generally reported in mediation programs for divorced and never-married populations. The CAS in El Paso routinely referred parents who failed to produce an agreement to a class that would instruct them on how to file documents in court to obtain and enforce visitation rights on a *pro se* basis. In Jefferson County, parents who failed to produce an agreement in facilitation were urged to pursue a mediation attempt at Jefferson County Mediation Services. In addition, nearly half of parents with unresolved cases were referred to the court to make appropriate filings.

Parents had the option of entering their agreements on a standard Parenting Plan or of crafting an agreement that was more individualistic. In both counties, the court agreed to incorporate signed parenting plans with existing child support orders and promulgate them as court orders. This eliminated the need for the parties to pursue a separate filing and/or pay a separate filing fee. The CAS in Jefferson County almost always pursued the route of developing a standard parenting plan and filing it with the court for promulgation as a court order. The CAS in El Paso County, on the other hand, frequently developed more individualistic write-ups that were kept as informal agreements between the parents and never formally entered with the court.

**Table 11. Agreements Reached in Facilitations Conducted with Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total	
★ Parties reached an agreement:				
	No	18%	32%	26%
	Yes	82%	68%	74%
	Number	(68)	(84)	(152)
★ If no agreement, recommended next action:				
	Court	67%	44%	52%
	Other	33%	56%	48%
	Number	(9)	(18)	(27)



**Table 11. Agreements Reached in Facilitations Conducted with Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total
★If there was an agreement, was it written:			
No	21%	2%	13%
Yes, using standardized parenting plan	52%	94%	71%
Yes, unique agreement for this couple	27%	4%	17%
Number	(56)	(47)	(103)
★If there was an agreement, was it entered with court:			
No	66%	17%	39%
No, need Parent Ed certificate	4%	3%	4%
Yes	30%	79%	57%
Number	(47)	(58)	(105)

\*Chi square is significant at .05 or less.

According to child access specialists, the most common topics discussed in facilitation sessions revolved around the visitation schedule, telephone contact and ways to improve communication, and co-parenting and the importance of consistent visitation. Although few noncustodial parents indicated that the children’s safety and well-being during visits was a problem, this was discussed in 39 percent of the facilitations. This is consistent with previous research showing that some problems that noncustodial parents perceive to be “visitation denial” stem from the custodial parent’s concerns about child safety during visits (Pearson and Anhalt, 1993). Many facilitation sessions also address issues dealing with child support payments (42%), compliance problems (22%), and new partners (31%).

Child access specialists reported high rates of success in resolving many topics that were discussed in facilitation sessions including what the order provides, when the noncustodial parent will see the children, how to ensure safety during visits, telephone contact, new partners, visiting consistently, and developmentally appropriate parenting behaviors. They reported somewhat lower resolution rates for issues pertaining to supervised visits, supervised exchanges, and neutral locations for exchange (see Table 12).

**Table 12. Topics Discussed and Resolved in Facilitation Sessions with Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group (N=141)**

	Percent with this Issue Discussed	If Discussed, Percent with Issue Resolved
What the visitation order provides	27%	91%
When the NCP will see the children	96%	78%
Ways for the parents to improve communication and co-parenting	74%	75%
How to ensure children’s safety and well-being during visits	39%	69%
Whether to use supervised visitations	29%	76%
Whether to use supervised pick-up and drop-off	9%	50%
Whether to use a neutral location for exchange	20%	65%



**Table 12. Topics Discussed and Resolved in Facilitation Sessions with Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group (N=141)**

	Percent with this Issue Discussed	If Discussed, Percent with Issue Resolved
Telephone contact	83%	88%
Child support payments	42%	78%
Child support compliance problems	22%	62%
New partner and their role	31%	74%
Developmentally appropriate parenting behaviors	47%	79%
Visiting consistently	69%	79%
Other	48%	62%

The primary treatment that the CAS offered to project participants in the high-level treatment group was a facilitated conference with both parents aimed at identifying and resolving parenting time disagreements. Table 13 shows that the CAS in both counties initially recommended a few other interventions, the chief ones being attendance at a parenting class and communication with the other parent and case management services. The latter involved periodic telephone calls by the CAS to one or both parents to monitor the exercise of parenting time and attempt to develop a “habit” of regular and problem-free visitation. Although formal mediation services were available to project participants in both counties at no charge, the CAS tended not to recommend this service in their initial meetings with parents, since they expected problems to be resolved using informal approaches like facilitation.

Parents in Jefferson County tended to follow through on the recommendation to attend a single-session class on parenting and communication with the other parent. This was a requirement that judges in Jefferson County imposed on all parents who filed a Parenting Plan with the court. Most facilitation sessions with the CAS in Jefferson County resulted in the generation of a parenting plan that was promulgated with the court. Judges in El Paso County did not require parents to attend a parenting class prior to promulgating their parenting plans as a court order. Additionally, a majority of facilitation sessions with the CAS resulted in agreements that were kept at an informal level and not filed with the court.

Previous research on parent education programs find that although parents who attend report satisfactory experiences, they rarely attend unless they are compelled by the court (Thoennes and Pearson, 1999). To overcome this problem, at least 25 states have mandated divorcing (and/or relitigating) parents to attend an approved parent education program and present a certificate of attendance to the court as evidence of their participation (Clement, 1998; Geasler and Blaisure, 1998).



**Table 13. Other Services Recommended by the CAS to Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group**

	El Paso County	Jefferson County	Total
★Other Services Were Recommended By CAS:	35%	62%	48%
Number	(263)	(261)	(524)
If other services were recommended, other service was:			
★Mediation	15%	3%	8%
Supervised exchange	0%	1%	0.4%
★Case management/telephone monitoring	8%	35%	25%
★Single-session parenting class for one or both parties	2%	91%	59%
★ <i>Pro se</i> /court referral	6%	0%	2%
Other	2%	2%	2%
Number	(91)	(162)	(253)
★Cases receiving other recommended services:	77%	64%	48%
Number	(91)	(162)	(253)
If other services were received, other services were:			
★Mediation	10%	1%	4%
★Case management/telephone monitoring	13%	29%	23%
★Single-session parenting class for one or both parties	0%	64%	39%
★ <i>Pro se</i> /court referral	6%	0%	2%
Other	37%	4%	17%
Number	(71)	(110)	(181)

★Chi square is significant at .05 or less.







## Parent Reactions to Project Services

### Characteristics of Respondents in the Follow-Up Interview

Approximately six months after they enrolled in the Parenting Time Project, telephone interviewers attempted to contact all parents in every treatment group to conduct an interview about their experiences with the program, reactions to the various services they received, and levels of parent-child contact. The interviews were conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory of Northern Illinois University. Completed interviews took an average of 22 minutes. Telephone interviewers attempted to reach 480 parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups and POP. They completed 186 interviews for a completion rate of 39 percent. Only 5 percent of targeted respondents refused to participate. Most of the non-completes were due to disconnected or wrong numbers or the inability to reach a respondent (see Table 14).

**Table 14. Detailed Description of Interview Attempts, by Group**

Number of calls attempted	480
Completed Interview	39% (186)
Non-working/disconnected/wrong number	30% (146)
Refused	5% (24)
No answer	25% (121)
Other	1% (3)

Table 15 presents selected characteristics of the parents who were interviewed six months after they enrolled in the project. The high-level treatment group only consisted of parents who received services; those who failed to follow through and appear for services, those who could not be reached, and/or those who were excluded from the project were not contacted for follow-up interviews. The low-level treatment group consisted of parents in Jefferson County who only received printed materials about parenting time and lists of community resources. The POP group consisted of parents in El Paso County who were offered help with parenting time and employment.

The group of parents contacted and interviewed by telephone researchers differed from the full group of parents that received services. The key differences in the group that was interviewed was a higher proportion of female respondents (including custodial parents), previously married parents, fewer parents who worked full time, and fewer parents who lived less than 50 miles from their children.



**Table 15. Selected Characteristics of Parents Interviewed, by Group**

	All high-level/ received services group	High-level/ received services interviewed group	Low-level treatment group	POP
Percent male	96%	51%	58%	61%
Percent never married	61%	41%	36%	29%
Percent employed full-time	80%	60%	72%	59%
Percent with annual household income below \$20,000	39%	47%	44%	50%
Percent who live less than 50 miles from their children	74%	55%	68%	54%
Number	(176)	(109)	(57)	(23)

**Printed Information**

Table 16 shows the extent to which parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups recalled receiving printed information on access and visitation through in-person or mail formats. The group that received a mailed packet (Jefferson County low-level treatment group) was just as likely to recall receiving printed information on access and visitation as members of the high-level treatment group who actually received in-person services (81% and 77%).

**Table 16. Parent Reports of Receiving Printed Materials on Parenting Time, by Group**

	High-level treatment group	Low-level treatment group
Received information on access and visitation from child support agency via in-person meeting or by mail:		
Yes	77%	81%
No	23%	19%
Number	(56)	(57)

Table 17 shows that most of the 46 parents who recalled receiving the mailing said they looked at it. While relatively few (23%) said that they had called any of the referrals that were provided in the packet of printed material that they received, approximately two-thirds said that they had used the information to establish contact with the custodial parent, make their visits go better, and to keep track of their visits.



**Table 17. Responses of Parents in the Low-Level Treatment Group Who Recalled Receiving Printed Information**

	Low-level treatment group (N=46)	Percent reporting information was helpful
Looked through material:		
Yes	94%	N/A
Percent who reported using any of the tips or information to set up contact with CP	62%	92%
Percent who reported using any of the tips or information to make visits go better	60%	96%
Percent who reported using any of the tips or information to call referrals that were provided	23%	80%
Percent who reported using any of the tips or information to start keeping track of visits (NCP only)	65%	100%

**Facilitation**

Table 18 examines the reactions of parents in the experimental groups to the chief form of assistance that child access specialists provided: facilitation sessions and parent conferences. About two-thirds of the parents in each group reported meeting with the CAS to talk about parenting time. The other parent was significantly more apt to participate in facilitations conducted by CAS in the high-level treatment group. Only a third of the facilitations reported by POP participants that were interviewed included the other parent, as compared with 70 percent of facilitations that involved interviewed members of the high-level treatment group.

Approximately half of the interviewed respondents in each group said that the child access specialists had helped them to reach an agreement on parenting time, and two-thirds of those were characterized as temporary and not entered with the court. These outcome patterns differed substantially from those reported by child access specialists in El Paso and Jefferson counties who reported reaching agreements in 82 and 68 percent of the cases they facilitated, respectively. Parent respondents and child access specialists gave similar accounts of whether their agreements were entered with the court.

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of parents in the high-level treatment group were somewhat or very satisfied with the facilitation services they had received. This was the case for 60 percent of POP participants. Although 33 percent of POP participants characterized themselves as “very dissatisfied,” the analysis is based on only 15 responses and should be viewed with caution.



**Table 18. Responses of Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group and El Paso County POP Groups to Facilitation Services**

	High-level	POP
Met with child support worker/CAS to talk about parenting time:		
Yes	65%	65%
No	35%	35%
Number	(108)	(23)
★Of those who met, percent reporting other parent attended:	70%	33%
Number	(69)	(15)
Worker helped reach an agreement on parenting time:		
Yes	57%	53%
No	43%	47%
Number	(70)	(15)
Of those with agreements, was the agreement:		
Temporary	62%	63%
Permanent	39%	38%
Number	(39)	(8)
Agreement entered with the court:		
Yes	45%	57%
No	55%	43%
Number	(38)	(7)
Overall satisfaction with the parenting time help received:		
Very satisfied	40%	47%
Somewhat satisfied	31%	13%
Somewhat dissatisfied	18%	7%
Very dissatisfied	12%	33%
Number	(68)	(15)

★ Chi square is significant at .05.

Table 19 shows the topics that parents recalled discussing in facilitation sessions and the perceived helpfulness of the discussions. Many different topics were addressed. The most common were setting up a parenting time plan and a specific schedule for visits, communicating with the other parent, arguing in front of the children, and child support and financial issues. Most discussions were perceived to be very helpful by about half of responding parents. About a third of parents rated most discussions as “somewhat helpful,” and about a quarter of parents viewed them as unhelpful. Discussions about child support were viewed as less helpful than other topics, with only 38 percent characterizing them as “very” helpful.



**Table 19. Reports of Parents in High-Level Treatment Group on Topics Discussed in Facilitation and Their Helpfulness**

(N=108)

	Percent discussed	If discussed, level of helpfulness		
		Very	Somewhat	Not
Setting up a parenting time order	81%	49%	30%	21%
Specific times and places for visits	80%	48%	29%	23%
How to make contact more consistent and regular	75%	49%	29%	22%
Changes to a parenting time plan you already had	49%	52%	36%	12%
Steps to take to get a parent back into a child's life	61%	45%	33%	21%
How to deal with the other parent/communicate	79%	44%	38%	18%
Where the child will be on holidays and vacations	76%	50%	33%	17%
Marriage/romantic partners and how they fit into visits	42%	24%	59%	17%
The child's safety during visits	53%	54%	22%	24%
What to do during visits	47%	49%	46%	6%
Arguing between parents and criticizing each other in front of the child	81%	54%	30%	16%
Child support or other financial issues	81%	38%	38%	25%

**Mediation**

Mediation services were made available to members of the high-level treatment group who neglected to reach an agreement in facilitation. The packets of printed information that were sent to members of the low-level treatment group included a flier about free mediation services at Jefferson County Mediation Services. Table 20 shows that nearly a third (29%) of interviewed parents in the high-level treatment group and 53 percent of those in the low-level treatment group reported meeting with a mediator to talk about parenting time.

Interviewed parents in the two groups reported high levels of agreement in their mediation interventions. The reported rate was 65 percent for members of the high-level treatment group and 87 percent for members of the low-level treatment group who used Jefferson County Mediation Services. Both groups of responding parents reported extremely high levels of user satisfaction, with 74 and 84 percent of each group saying that they were very or somewhat satisfied.



**Table 20. Responses of Parents in the High-Level and Low-Level Treatment Groups to Mediation**

	High-level	Low-level
★Percent met with a mediator to talk about parenting time:	29%	53%
Number	(108)	(57)
★Percent who reached an agreement in Mediation:	65%	87%
Number	(31)	(30)
Overall Satisfaction With Mediation:		
Very satisfied	32%	57%
Somewhat satisfied	42%	27%
Somewhat dissatisfied	10%	10%
Very dissatisfied	16%	7%

★ Chi square is significant at .07.

### Parent Education

A substantial proportion of interviewed parents in both the high-level and low-level treatment groups (34% versus 49%) went to parent education classes. Those that went rated it very favorably, with three-quarters characterizing themselves as “very satisfied” (see Table 21).

**Table 21. Responses of Parents in the High-Level and Low-Level Treatment Groups to Parent Education Classes**

	High-level	Low-level
Percent who went to Parent Education classes:	34%	49%
Number	(108)	(57)
Overall Satisfaction With Parent Education Class:		
Very satisfied	70%	79%
Somewhat satisfied	24%	18%
Somewhat dissatisfied	5%	4%
Very dissatisfied	0%	0%
Number	(37)	(28)

### Court

It was rarer for parents in the high- and low-level treatment groups to go to court about parenting time, and only 14 and 19 percent of respondents in the two groups, respectively, reported that they had been to court or were scheduled to go. Most of those who had gone to court had experienced a hearing or met with a judge, the chief outcome of which was a parenting time plan. Other common outcomes were being told to go to a parent education class or to meet with a mediator. Only nine and eight parents in each group rated their court experiences, making conclusions about parent reactions to court unreliable. Nevertheless, it appears that they rated their court experiences less favorably than their mediation, facilitation, and education experiences.



**Table 22. Responses in the High-Level and Low-Level Treatment Groups to Court Experiences**

	High-level treatment	Low-level treatment
★Percent who reported going to court about parenting time:		
Went to court	8%	14%
Scheduled, have not gone yet	6%	5%
Did not go to court	86%	77%
Do not know	0%	4%
Number	(108)	(57)
Of those who went to court, actions taken:		
Someone at court helped figure out the right papers to file	27%	55%
Met with a worker to talk about case	27%	46%
Had a hearing or met with a judge at court	67%	73%
Number	(15)	(11)
Of those who went to court, what happened:		
Got a parenting time plan	78%	88%
Told to go to parenting classes	44%	63%
Told to go to mediation	56%	50%
Someone was assigned to investigate your case	22%	50%
Case was continued or rescheduled	44%	63%
Number	(9)	(8)
Overall satisfaction with court:		
Very satisfied	11%	50%
Somewhat satisfied	44%	0%
Somewhat dissatisfied	22%	38%
Very dissatisfied	22%	13%
Number	(9)	(8)

★Chi square is significant at .03.

### Other Services

Table 23 reviews a variety of other access and visitation services that parents might have utilized to resolve their parenting time problems. They include legal clinics to learn how to do *pro se* filings, supervised visitation services, supervised drop-off and pick-up services, private attorneys, and legal services programs. Fewer than 20 percent of interviewed parents reported using all of these services, with the exception of private attorneys, which were utilized by 23 percent of respondents in each group. This is surprising, given the fact that half of the parents interviewed in each group reported an annual household income below \$20,000 per year. Representation by a private attorney garnered the highest satisfaction ratings, along with legal clinics and supervised visitation services. Supervised drop-off and pick-up services were somewhat less satisfactory to responding parents, as was Legal Aid. Due to funding constraints, legal services programs tend only to take on family law cases that involve domestic violence, so many parents who contacted Legal Aid were presumably told by the agency that they were ineligible for services.



**Table 23. Responses of Parents in High-Level and Low-Level Treatment Groups and POP to Other Access and Visitation Services**

	High-level (N=108)	Low-level (N=57)	POP (N=23)
Percent reported			
Went to Legal Clinic for help with parenting time:	7%	12%	9%
Percent responding "very" or "somewhat" satisfied	63%	86%	★ ★
Utilized supervised visitation services:	20%	27%	27%
Percent responding "very" or "somewhat" satisfied	57%	74%	50%
Utilized supervised pick-up/drop-off services:	19%	16%	23%
★ Percent responding "very" or "somewhat" satisfied	45%	55%	100%
Used a private attorney:	23%	23%	27%
Percent responding "very" or "somewhat" satisfied	71%	62%	66%
Went to Legal Aid:	19%	16%	32%
Percent responding "very" or "somewhat" satisfied	45%	44%	28%

★ Chi square is significant at .05.

★ ★ Too few clients reported going to court from the POP program to report their results.





## Participant Outcomes: Parent Reports

Changes in parent-child contact patterns and parental relationships can only be gauged from interviews with project participants following their enrollment. The interviews conducted by professional interviewers six months after parents enrolled in the project offer some clue on perceived changes in these areas. At the same time, it is important to be aware of the limits of the interviewing effort and the factors that may have skewed the interview results.

One problem is the fact that the only individuals who were interviewed in the high-level treatment group were those who had received project services and had participated in a facilitation session with the CAS. As previously noted, the sample of parents in this group who were interviewed included a disproportionate number of women, including custodial mothers. It also included a disproportionate number of parents who had been previously married. It is likely that these individuals were more geographically stable and accessible to telephone interview efforts. Although it is understandable that their experiences would be captured in the interview process, their predominance limits the generalizability of the results to the full sample of parents in the high-level treatment group.

Another problem is the fact that a substantial proportion of interviewed parents in the low-level treatment group reported receiving in-person services to address their parenting-time problems. More than half of these respondents said that they had participated in mediation efforts (53%) that had almost always (87%) led to the production of a parenting plan. In addition, almost half (49%) had attended a parent education classes (49%).

As previously noted, POP participants were eligible to receive assistance with parenting time and employment and they typically engaged in facilitations with POP staff, although usually without the participation of the other parent.

These factors suggest that all three groups received in-person help with parenting time and that there was no group that was accorded a “low-level” treatment of only getting printed material.

## Changes in Parenting Time

Table 24 compares parent-child contact patterns before and after enrollment in the Parenting Time Project. It shows that parents in all groups tend to report an increase in contact with their children following project participation and a decrease in complete noninvolvement. At the same time, the differences are only statistically significant for those in the low-level treatment group and the POP group. Members of the high-level treatment group reported pre- and post-program contact patterns that were statistically equivalent.



**Table 24. Parent Reports of Frequency of Parent-Child Contact Before and After Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment group		Low-level treatment group		POP	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
How Often Parent Reports Seeing Children:						
About once per week or more	21%	30%	38%	35%	27%	31%
About once per month or more	15%	18%	10%	22%	7%	25%
A few times per year	11%	7%	10%	5%	20%	6%
Never	54%	45%	43%	38%	47%	38%
Number	(88)	(76)	(42)	(37)	(15)	(16)

★Differences are significant between Before and After at .09 or less.

Table 25 looks at parenting time prior to and following enrollment in the project somewhat differently. It examines the proportion of parent respondents in each treatment group who reported an increase in the amount of time the visiting parent spent with the children and changes in the regularity of visitation. The analysis revealed no differences by group in the rate of improvement in visitation frequency or regularity following project participation. Statistically equivalent proportions of parent respondents in every group reported that contact had increased (approximately 40%) and that visitation had become more regular (32% to 46%).

**Table 25. Parent Reports of Frequency and Regularity of Parent-Child Contact Following Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment group		Low-level treatment group		POP	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Amount of time spend with children following project enrollment has:						
Increased	40%	39%	39%	46%	46%	46%
Stayed the same	37%	41%	41%	18%	18%	18%
Decreased	24%	20%	20%	36%	36%	36%
Number	(106)	(54)	(54)	(22)	(22)	(22)
Regularity of contact following project enrollment:						
More regular	32%	35%	35%	46%	46%	46%
About the same	47%	48%	48%	18%	18%	18%
Less regular	21%	17%	17%	36%	36%	36%
Number	(104)	(54)	(54)	(22)	(22)	(22)



**Changes in Parent Relationships**

Table 26 shows that parents in every treatment group were more likely to characterize their relationship with the other parent as “friendly and cooperative” following their enrollment in the Parenting Time Project. They were less likely to report relationships that they termed as “angry, or hostile.” The differences were statistically significant for the high- and low-level treatment groups, but not for POP, which may be due to the small number of parents that were interviewed in that group (N=21). As previously noted, parents in all three groups received in-person treatments dealing with access and visitation, including facilitation, mediation, and parent education classes.

**Table 26. Parent Reports of Relationship with the Other Parent Before and After Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level (N=106)		Low-level (N=56)		POP (N=21)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Describe relationship with the other parent before you were offered help with parenting time:						
		★		★		
Friendly and cooperative	8%	26%	11%	25%	0%	29%
Strained but able to cooperate	35%	39%	27%	27%	43%	38%
Hostile, angry	23%	6%	23%	14%	38%	0%
No contact	35%	29%	39%	34%	19%	33%

★ Differences are significant between Before and After at .09 or less.

Table 27 also looks at parent perceptions of their relationship with the other parent following their enrollment in the project. Asked if their relationships had changed, statistically identical percentages of parents in each group characterized them as improved, the same, or worse.

**Table 27. Parent Reports of Status of Relationship with the Other Parent Following Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level	Low-level	POP
Status of Relationship with other parent:			
Improved	27%	22%	41%
Stayed the same	53%	60%	36%
Become worse	19%	18%	23%
Number	(103)	(55)	(22)



**Changes in the Image of the Child Support Agency**

Since the inception of the child support program, the issues of visitation and child support have been kept legally distinct and the child support agency has offered no assistance with visitation. Program architects and funders wondered whether the provision of printed information and in-person services on visitation would improve the image of the child support agency and make it viewed as more equitable and even-handed.

Table 28 shows that interviewed parents in the three treatment groups generated in this project held statistically identical views of the child support agency. Approximately half said their perceptions had stayed the same, a quarter indicated that they had improved, and about a fifth indicated that they had worsened. The different patterns for members of the POP group probably reflect the small number of parent respondents in that group.

**Table 28. Parent Views on the Child Support Agency Before and After Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment group	Low-level treatment group	POP
Compared to before you got information or help, your view of the child support agency has gotten:			
Better	25%	26%	32%
Stayed the same	59%	53%	36%
Worse	16%	21%	32%
Number	(104)	(57)	(22)

**Changes Reported by Those Who Develop Parenting Plans**

Table 29 considers whether parents who were successful in generating parenting plans and agreements about visitation using facilitation and mediation techniques experienced more substantial improvements in project outcomes. In other words, did parents who used project services to greatest advantage and resolved their visitation problems realize significant improvements in parental relationships, parent-child contact, and child support payments? And did their view of the child support agency change?

The analysis shows that parents in the high-level treatment group who reported reaching agreements on parenting time were significantly more likely to report improvements in their relationships with the other parent (44% versus 11%). They were significantly more likely to report that the amount of time that the visiting parent spent with the children had increased (63% versus 28%). Finally, they were significantly more apt to report that their view of the child support agency had improved (38% versus 25%).



**Table 29. Changes Following Program Enrollment  
Reported by Interviewed Parents in the High-Level Treatment Group,  
by Parenting Time Agreement**

	High-level treatment group	
	Agreement	No agreement
★ Status of Relationship with other parent:		
Improved	44%	11%
Stayed the same	41%	56%
Become worse	15%	33%
Number	(39)	(27)
★ Amount of time spend with children following project enrollment has:		
Increased	63%	28%
Stayed the same	23%	38%
Decreased	15%	35%
Number	(40)	(29)
★ Compared to before you got information or help, your view of the child support agency has:		
Gotten better	38%	25%
Stayed the same	58%	54%
Gotten worse	5%	21%
Number	(40)	(28)
★ Chi square is significant at .1 or less.		





## Participant Outcomes: Child Support Records

One objective of the project was to increase child support payments by addressing and attempting to resolve access and visitation problems. Many NCPs contend that they do not pay child support because they are denied visitation. Many studies show that problems with parenting time and child support payment go hand-in-hand. What is less well understood is the causal relationship between the two. Does parenting time lead to child support payment? Does child support payment lead to parenting time? Are both perhaps caused by a third, independent variable?

Table 30 presents some child support case characteristics for the noncustodial parents in the various treatment groups considered in this project: the low-level treatment group in Jefferson County, which received printed materials about access and visitation resources in the community in response to their request for help but could access free mediation and parent education services; the Parent Opportunity Program (POP) participants in El Paso County, which received facilitation and mediation services as well as help with employment in response to their request for help; the group of parents in both counties that received facilitation services and other forms of assistance offered by child access specialists; and the members of the high-level treatment group in both counties who were not served because they failed to follow through or were excluded for a variety of reasons.

A comparison of the child support status of parents in the various treatment groups shows significant differences in case type at project enrollment. Those in the low-level treatment group were significantly more likely to have past experience with public assistance, with 44 percent of the cases held by parents in this group involving the past receipt of TANF. Another difference displayed by parents in this group was the high incidence of modification cases (59%). Still a third feature of the cases in the low-level treatment group was a higher incidence of child support orders established without the participation of the noncustodial parent using default procedures.

Parents in the POP group were significantly more likely to have an interstate case. As previously noted, El Paso County included interstate cases in the project, while Jefferson County restricted the project to intrastate cases. The POP group was significantly less likely to consist of child support orders that were established by stipulation and more apt to be comprised of orders established through a contested court proceeding.

Finally, cases in the high-level treatment group that received facilitation and other project services by the CAS were significantly more likely to have evidence of a verified employer.



Nearly half of all orders in this group were established by stipulation (47%) and only 11 percent were established by default, without the participation of the noncustodial parent.

**Table 30. Characteristics of Child Support Cases at Project Enrollment for Parents in Different Groups**

	High-level treatment/ received facilitation services (n=162)	High-level treatment/ no facilitation services (n=313)	Low-level treatment group (n=109)	POP (n=60)
★TANF status:				
Current TANF	2%	4%	6%	5%
Former TANF	33%	33%	44%	27%
Never TANF	65%	63%	50%	68%
★Order status:				
Current support order	41%	40%	22%	38%
Modification	48%	46%	59%	38%
Existing order, new IV-D case	11%	13%	19%	23%
★Interstate status:				
Intrastate	83%	81%	95%	72%
Interstate, initiating	4%	5%	4%	3%
Interstate, responding	7%	10%	0%	14%
Direct, interstate wage assignment	6%	5%	1%	10%
★Order established by:				
Stipulation	47%	38%	47%	17%
Default	11%	10%	17%	7%
Court	40%	48%	35%	68%
Other	3%	5%	1%	8%
★Verified employer at intake:				
Yes	66%	52%	52%	51%
No	33%	46%	48%	46%
Cannot determine	0%	2%	1%	4%

★Differences between groups are significant at .05 or less.

Table 31 provides information on the child support orders held by noncustodial parents in the various groups for the case for which they sought help with parenting time. This is termed the “target case.”

While there were no differences in average, monthly order levels for noncustodial parents in the various treatment groups, there were statistically significant differences between members of the high-level treatment group who were served and not served. Those who failed to appear for facilitations or were excluded from the project because of domestic violence or out-of-state residence had significantly higher arrears balances and monthly obligations for their child support arrears. Conversely, parents who received facilitation services had the lowest average arrears balance (\$6,426) and the lowest monthly arrears obligation (\$61) when they enrolled in the project.





Members of the low-level treatment group had the highest arrears balances, which stood at an average of \$10,813. It will be recalled that this group had the highest rate of orders that were established by default, without the participation of the noncustodial parent and the highest rate of current and/or prior TANF involvement. As previously noted, although cases were supposed to be assigned to the high- and low-level treatment groups on a random basis, this was not always done, and many cases from the low-level treatment group were generated at court hearings for non-payment of child support.

**Table 31. Information on the Child Support Order for the Target Case Held by Noncustodial Parents at Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment/ Facilitation services	High-level treatment/ No facilitation serves	Low-level treatment	POP
Amount of child support due per month:				
Mean	\$358	\$346	\$359	\$333
Range	\$43-1,447	\$25-1,227	\$50-2,250	\$50-857
Number	(161)	(312)	(103)	(60)
★ Amount of arrears due monthly:				
Mean	\$61	\$73	\$59	\$64
Range	\$5-250	\$3-457	\$3-250	\$10-181
Number	(109)	(233)	(85)	(41)
★ Arrears balance:				
Mean	\$6,426	\$9,682	\$10,813	\$7,658
Range	\$1-33,040	\$16-78,675	\$211-50,327	\$40-38,148
Number	(123)	(264)	(97)	(48)
★ Differences are significant at .09 or less between high-level treatment group cases served and not served.				

Table 32 presents additional information on the child support status of noncustodial parents in the various treatment groups when they enrolled in the Colorado Parenting Time Project and the characteristics of the case for which they sought help with visitation. While there were no statistically significant differences in the age of the child support case that brought parents into the project to obtain help with visitation, those in high-level treatment group that received facilitation services were marginally younger. On average, these cases had been opened in the child support system for 3.2 years; half had been opened for less than two years.

Across all treatment groups, noncustodial parents had an average of 1.2 to 1.4 open child support cases and a median of one open case. As with arrears balances for the target case that brought the parent into the project seeking help with visitation, arrears balances across all child support cases were significantly higher for members of the low-level treatment group. On average, these parents owed \$15,555 in past-due child support. To contrast, parents in the high-level treatment group who received facilitation services owed an average of \$7,869. These differences further confirm that the treatment groups were not generated using random



assignment techniques and that the CAS in Jefferson County identified many members of the low-level treatment group at court hearings for non-payment of child support.

**Table 32. Information on the Age of the Child Support Case and Multiple Case Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents at Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment/ facilitation services	High-level treatment/ no facilitation services	Low-level treatment group	POP
Age of order on ACSES, in months:				
Mean	38.5	47.9	46.6	47.5
Range	1-163	1-209	1-201	1-225
Number	(128)	(261)	(77)	(51)
Number of child support cases on ACSES:				
Mean	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.2
Range	1-5	1-4	1-4	1-4
Number	(160)	(305)	(106)	(59)
★ACSES arrears balance on all cases:				
Mean	\$7,869	\$12,003	\$15,555	\$9,738
Range	\$2-50,955	\$12-106,219	\$53-107,242	\$40-55,704
Number	(133)	(265)	(91)	(47)
★Chi square is significant at .05 or less.				

Table 33 compares child support payment behavior at 6, 12, and 18 months prior to and following the noncustodial parent’s enrollment in the Parenting Time Project. It compares the total amount of current support due during each time period with the total amount paid. The resulting fraction represents the amount due that was ultimately paid for cases with an obligation and sufficient history, and is an excellent indicator of payment performance.

The table indicates that every group made significant improvements in payment performance following project enrollment. For example, at the six-month comparison, rates of payment for cases that received help from the Child Access Specialists went from 55 to 63 percent. Payments in cases that were assigned to the high-level treatment group but did not receive facilitation services went from 48 to 58 percent. Payment patterns in the POP group went from 53 to 68 percent. And among cases in the low-level treatment group that received printed information, payments went from 41 to 53 percent. Similar improvements for cases in every group occurred at the 12- and 18-month comparisons. Most of the improvement was due to a decline in the percentage paying nothing, which dropped significantly.

These increases exceeded the gains in monthly child support collected for the caseload as a whole in Jefferson and El Paso counties during a comparable time period. For example, between December 2005 and 2006, average monthly payments of child support in El Paso County rose



from 57.3 to 58.8 percent of the amount due, while they increased from 59.1 to 59.9 percent in Jefferson County.

One interpretation of the finding of substantial increases in payment across all treatment groups in the Parenting Time Project is that improvements in child support payment among project participants were due to something other than actually providing access and visitation services. Another interpretation is that all groups showed payment increases because members of every treatment group at least had an opportunity to talk about their visitation problems with someone at child support.

Two previous studies of State Access and Visitation Programs by the OIG and CPR concluded that parents who participated in access and visitation programs improved their payment patterns, although both studies lacked a non-treatment comparison group or a low-level treatment group where the only help offered was printed material. In the OIG study, 61 percent paid more child support after receiving services and payments rose from 52 to 70 percent of what was owed (OIG, 2002). And in the CPR study, payments for never-married parents went from 59 to 79 percent of what was owed (Pearson, Davis and Thoennes, 2005).

**Table 33. Child Support Paid Pre- and Post-Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment/ received facilitation services		High-level treatment/ no facilitation services		Low-level treatment group		POP	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
6 months pre- and post-	★		★		★		★	
Average monthly amount paid:	55%	63%	48%	58%	41%	53%	53%	68%
Percent paying nothing	15%	12%	18%	10%	20%	9%	16%	9%
Number	(142)	(142)	(269)	(269)	(93)	(93)	(49)	(49)
12 months pre- and post-	★		★		★		★	
Average monthly amount paid:	54%	64%	46%	56%	41%	54%	60%	71%
Percent paying nothing	12%	8%	12%	7%	16%	6%	12%	7%
Number	(90)	(90)	(202)	(202)	(73)	(73)	(39)	(39)
18 months pre- and post-	★		★		★		★	
Average monthly amount paid:	52%	63%	46%	56%	38%	54%	50%	68%
Percent paying nothing	11%	6%	9%	7%	15%	5%	12%	7%
Number	(143)	(160)	(275)	(295)	(95)	(102)	(51)	(55)

★Pre- and post-t-test is significant at .05 or less.

Table 34 further examines the relationship between providing services to parents with access and visitation problems and changes in their payment of child support. It focuses on those who actually received facilitation services, and compares the amount of owed support that was actually paid for noncustodial parents who developed a parenting plan with their counterparts



who attempted but failed. The analysis provided little evidence that payment patterns tracked with the noncustodial parent’s ability to develop a parenting time plan and presumably resolve his problems with visitation. The only significant difference in payment for the two groups occurred at 18 months following enrollment in the project. Having entered the project with a worse history of payment, the group that failed to produce an agreement on parenting time exhibited a significant increase, although parents in both groups paid an identical two-thirds of what they owed.

**Table 34. Changes in Percent of Child Support Due that Was Paid Following Program Enrollment for High-Level Treatment Group Cases by Those Who Reached an Agreement on Parenting Time**

	High-level treatment group/received services			
	Agreement		No Agreement	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Average percent of MSO due that was paid 6 months pre- and post-project enrollment:	57%	63%	55%	66%
Number	(89)	(103)	(35)	(35)
Average percent of MSO due that was paid 12 months pre- and post-project enrollment:	59%	64%	53%	69%
Number	(75)	(76)	(27)	(31)
Average percent of MSO due that was paid 18 months pre- and post-project enrollment:	57%	★64%	51%	★63%
Number	(67)	(36)	(23)	(12)

★Differences are significant at 18 months post- between Agreement and No Agreement at .04.

Child support payments are typically elicited in an automatic manner through wage withholding, federal tax refund offsets, and the attachment of unemployment and workers’ compensation benefits. Table 35 shows that this was frequently the case for noncustodial parents in the project. On the other hand, there was no evidence that the increase in child support payment was due to increases in the utilization of wage withholding and other automatic forms of payment following project enrollment. Indeed, all the groups showed significant declines in payments due to attachments of unemployment benefits following program enrollment and several of the groups showed post-enrollment declines in the use of attachments of workers’ compensation benefits.

On the other hand, the table shows that many noncustodial parents in every group had experienced various enforcement actions prior to and following their enrollment in the project. More to the point, noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group experienced a significantly higher level of initiated reports to credit bureaus and contempt actions in the months following their enrollment in the project. Enforcement activity among parents in the other groups was high but generally comparable in both pre- and post-program time periods.



**Table 35. Source of Child Support Payments Made by Noncustodial Parents and Enforcement Actions Initiated in the Months Prior to and Following Project Enrollment, by Group**

	High-level treatment/ received facilitation services		High-level treatment/ no facilitation services		Low-level treatment group		POP	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Payment made by:								
Federal tax refund	72%	77%	77%	79%	81%	84%	63%	61%
Unemployment benefits	25%	★11%	★24%	★12%	★34%	★10%	★23%	★12%
Wage withholding	77%	★63%	★74%	★61%	★75%	★66%	64%	59%
Workers' compensation	7%	5%	★10%	★6%	★7%	★2%	3%	3%
Enforcement actions initiated:								
Credit bureau reporting	57%	57%	67%	69%	★72%	★79%	53%	57%
Driver's license suspension	45%	47%	★57%	★51%	66%	66%	33%	40%
Bank or property lien	17%	18%	23%	23%	27%	25%	17%	21%
Contempt action	18%	15%	18%	20%	★34%	★41%	9%	7%
Professional license suspension	1%	2%	2%	2%	★0%	★4%	0%	1%

★Pre- and post- differences are significant at .05 or less.

Are the improvements in child support payment that noncustodial parents in every group show following program enrollment due to an increase in enforcement activity? This was the case in a previous study of a program sponsored by the child support agency to provide employment services to noncustodial parents in Tarrant County, Texas. A comparison of payment patterns prior to and following the enrollment of these parents in the project found that payments improved for those who received project services as well as those who failed to show up for employment help, and that the payment increase was due to heightened attention by child support workers to all cases in the project and more vigorous enforcement activity (Center for Policy Research, 2006).

Table 36 considers whether this same phenomenon occurred in the Colorado Parenting Project. It compares changes in the percent of owed monthly support that was paid in the 12 months prior to and following project enrollment for those who were subject to the initiation of the most visible enforcement actions: driver's license suspensions and contempt actions. The table shows that enforcement activity was associated with payment improvements. Noncustodial parents who were subject to visible enforcement actions in every treatment group showed significant increases in child support payment. On the other hand, the only group to demonstrate an increase in payment in the 12 months following enrollment was the low-level treatment group. As previously noted, this group was significantly more likely to be recruited at



court hearings for non-payment, had the highest arrears balances, and the highest rates of pre- and post-program contempt activity.

**Table 36. Percent of Child Support Due that Was Paid 12 Months Prior to and Following Project Enrollment for Cases With and Without Visible Enforcement Activity**

	High-level treatment/ received facilitation services		High-level treatment/ no facilitation services		Low-level treatment group		POP	
	Pre- ★	Post- ★	Pre- ★	Post- ★	Pre- ★	Post- ★	Pre- ★	Post- ★
Percent of MSO due that was paid in cases that had a driver's license suspension or contempt action initiated post enrollment:	43%	55%	40%	51%	59%	49%	41%	58%
Number	(59)	(59)	(147)	(147)	(61)	(61)	(18)	(18)
★								
Percent of MSO due that was paid in cases that did not have a driver's license suspension or contempt action initiated post enrollment:	74%	82%	65%	70%	65%	77%	77%	82%
Number	(31)	(31)	(55)	(55)	(12)	(12)	(21)	(21)

★Differences are significant between Pre- and Post- amounts paid within each group at .09 or less.

The last question we considered was whether payment patterns improved more substantially for newer versus older child support cases. Only a small fraction of noncustodial parents were identified as having parenting time problems and recruited for the project when they were first developing child support orders. Obviously, they had no pre-program payment patterns with which to compare. During the 12 months following their enrollment, they paid approximately 60 percent of what they owed.

Those with younger child support orders who had established them no more than 12 months prior to disclosing their visitation problems and enrolling in the project did not exhibit any improvements in child support payment in the 12 months following their enrollment. While payments improved for parents in every treatment group, none of the differences were greater than what would be expected on the basis of chance alone.

To contrast, post-program payment patterns were significantly better in most treatment groups for those with older child support cases that had been established more than 13 months before they enrolled in the project. Enforcement actions like driver's license suspensions, contempt actions, and professional license suspensions generally take at least 13 months to be activated and become visible to noncustodial parents. Thus, any payment gains due to enforcement activity are likely to show up in somewhat older cases as opposed to newer ones.



**Table 37. Percent of Child Support Due that Was Paid in the 12 Months Prior to and Following Project Enrollment, by Age of Order and Group**

	High-level treatment/ Received facilitation services		High-level treatment/ no facilitation services		Low-level treatment group		POP	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Average percent of MSO due that was paid in the 12 months prior to and following enrollment:								
Order established after enrollment Number	N/A	62.6% (17)	N/A	55.6% (23)	N/A	52.8% (20)	N/A	58.8% (5)
Order established 1-12 months before enrollment Number	46% (16)	61% (16)	48% (23)	56% (23)	54% (12)	54% (12)	58% (8)	68% (8)
Order established 13 or more months before enrollment Number	57% (57)	66% (57)	48% (156)	56% (156)	36% (41)	54% (41)	63% (26)	74% (26)

★ Differences are significant within groups Pre- and Post- at .08 or less.







## Reactions of Staff

By the conclusion of the Parenting Time Project, most child support workers thought that it was a good idea to pay attention to visitation problems, but the transition was not an easy one. As one worker explained:

I was so used to saying that visitation and child support were two separate issues. I had said that for 17 years. So initially, I was very, very resistant. I was afraid of the emotion, and afraid of being in the middle of it.

In general, workers said that their experiences with making referrals for access and visitation problems had been positive and that they had enhanced the process of negotiating child support. Because many noncustodial parents feel as though they have “lost” the battle when they arrive at the child support agency, they are reassured by the worker’s willingness to pay attention to visitation issues. Although some noncustodial parents appear to want to increase their overnights to cut their child support expenses, others are perceived to be more genuine and “want us to know that they are good guys and that they are pursuing visitation.”

According to the child access worker, another benefit to addressing access and visitation issues at the child support agency was her ability to discover information about job changes and convey it to child support workers for rapid initiation of wage assignments.

Finally, workers felt that POP and other programs that offer help with access and visitation had changed the image of child support. In their view, the agency had come to be seen as more balanced and humane. People who had “never thought they’d be treated like a human” felt gratified with the help they received.

I think POP has changed the view of child support on the street. Fathers are frustrated about just being a wallet. I have some guys come in wanting help with parenting-time problems who don’t even have a child support case. It balances power. We always hear from NCPs, you’ve got all these remedies for her and nothing for me. This program addresses those imbalances.

While some workers felt that access programs made fathers more willing to pay and could cite examples of fathers who became connected with their children and then called to ask for a wage withholding order to be put into effect, others are more skeptical about the payment benefits of trying to help parents with visitation. In their view, nonpayment and nonvisitation often stem from similar, underlying issues that are not easily resolved.



People don't understand responsibility and regularity. It often isn't just a matter of developing a parenting plan. There is a lack of problem-solving skills. They don't understand why they have to commit to visiting on a set day and time.

Other factors that make problem-solving in the access and visitation arena more problematic for the child support caseload is their complicated family situations and the lack of good models of "normal" family structure.

There is multiple partner fertility and some men don't know they are fathers and have never met their children. Some have had no history with the other parent. How do you introduce a parent into the life of a child? We need services to help parents get re-acquainted with their children.

Finally, workers feel that many mothers view their baby as their personal property. Workers are frustrated by the fact that they can do little to compel a resistant mother from participating in facilitation and mediation.

She plays mental games. Today we are getting along, tomorrow I see him with a new girlfriend so he can't see the kids. That's what I see going on. If she knew we would suspend her driver's license or hold her in contempt, it would be different.

Many workers feel that it is most appropriate to discuss visitation when orders are being established and modified. At the conference to establish order, both parents are routinely asked about the number of overnights the child will have with the visiting parent. If they disagree, the worker has a natural opportunity to explore whether there are visitation problems. As one worker put it, "If there is a discrepancy between what parents say, I talk with them and usually discover that there was a verbal agreement they aren't following. So I refer them."

Other workers feel that referrals make sense at the enforcement stage. For example, one worker noted that "as an enforcement technician, my first question is whether they have parenting time." And according to another worker:

I use POP referrals a lot when I'm ready to file a contempt motion. I will stop my contempt action if he follows through and is receptive to the employment and visitation services available through POP. If he drops out, I feel better about filing.



Getting workers to make referrals at any stage of case processing, however, is a different matter. Line staff and administrators concede that this will require a “change of culture.” To cultivate a habit of referring, child access specialists in both counties tried to keep the project visible to workers. They shared success stories at staff meetings, they did a staff training program with a simulation of a facilitation session dealing with parenting time, they held pizza parties for the team that generated the greatest number of referrals, and workers who reached referral goals were granted coveted “dress-down” privileges that allowed them to wear jeans to work.

Child support administrators in Jefferson and El Paso counties agree that access interventions are unlikely to “show a million in collections.” As the administrator in El Paso County notes, “There is no evidence that it generates enough in collections to justify the 2.5 staff members dedicated to POP.” They feel that such interventions can be better justified based on their underlying “value,” and that by incorporating parenting time into the agency’s purview, the agency is working with the family as a “whole” and doing a better job of promoting their emotional and financial stability.

Another benefit of the program is in the realm of customer service. Access intervention is viewed as consistent with the agency’s new focus on customer service. Administrators feel as though the project has affected staff and that as a result, there is “less NCP-bashing and more telephone contact with NCPs.” Having a child access specialist on staff is perceived to be critical.

Staff interface with the child access specialist has led to a cultural shift in the office. There is more of an understanding of the dynamics of fatherhood. We are less rigid. We now believe in services for every family.

Administrators and staff cite several barriers to addressing access and visitation issues and referring parents for services on a routine basis at child support agencies. The chief obstacle is the lack of federal reimbursement for referral activities. Agencies will be reluctant to take on referral duties if they fear that a federal audit will result in these costs being disallowed.

Another possible barrier is the time frames for orders to be established. For example, if the development of a parenting plan is a regular part of the process of establishing a child support order, some workers feel that more time needs to be allowed for parenting plans to be developed and entered with the court. Finally, administrators wonder which entity will be responsible for enforcing parenting plans if they are generated with the assistance of child support and incorporated with the child support order.



Both counties plan to address access and visitation matters after the expiration of the project. El Paso County will continue to offer assistance with employment and visitation matters through the POP program. In Jefferson County, the Jefferson County Mediation Service will make certain time slots available for child support appointments and accept referrals from the child support agency.



## Summary, Key Findings, and Conclusions

### Summary

A 2004 award to Colorado from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement led to the initiation of the Colorado Parenting Time Project, which aimed to assess whether identifying parents with visitation problems in the child support caseload and providing services aimed at resolving them improves parent-child contact and the subsequent payment of child support. Conducted in child support agencies in El Paso and Jefferson counties, the project ultimately involved the identification of 716 cases with visitation problems during May 2005 to December 2006, and their assignment to different groups for treatments of varying intensity. They include:

- In both counties, a high-level treatment group that was offered informal facilitation by the child access specialist (CAS), a specially trained worker at the child support agency retained with grant funds;
- In Jefferson County, a low-level treatment group that was handed or mailed printed information about parenting time problems and various community resources to help parents with access problems, including free mediation and parent education services; and
- In El Paso County, an established unit within the child support agency (Parent Opportunity Project, or POP) that offers noncustodial parents assistance with employment and parenting time using both facilitation and mediation techniques.

Parents in the high-level treatment group in Jefferson and El Paso counties who produced a parenting time agreement with the CAS had the option of submitting it to the court for incorporation with child support orders without paying a separate filing fee. Parents in the POP and low-level treatment group had to pursue a separate legal filing (and pay a filing fee of \$176) to turn any parenting time agreement they developed into a court order.

The project evaluation assessed the number and types of parents that enrolled in the project, the services they received, and the outcomes they experienced. It was based on forms completed by participating parents at project enrollment, records of project services delivered to parents by the child access specialists in each county, follow-up telephone interviews with custodial and non-custodial parents in the low- and high-level treatment groups conducted six months following project enrollment, and a review of automated child support records for all project cases and extraction of information on payment activity prior to and following project enrollment.



The study has a number of limitations that reduce the generalizability of the results. One was the substantial level of pre-existing differences in the child support status of parents assigned to the high- and low-level treatment groups in Jefferson County and the high-level and POP groups in El Paso County. Another shortcoming was the lack of a true control site. As previously noted, it was impossible to generate a low-level treatment group in El Paso County because POP provided employment and visitation assistance to all parents in the child support caseload. And the child access specialist in Jefferson County talked with most noncustodial parents in the low-level treatment group about their visitation problems and referred them to a program that offers free mediation to county residents. In addition, the court in Jefferson County requires parents to attend a free class on co-parenting and communication before it will promulgate a parenting plan as a court order. A third limitation was the availability of detailed information only on parents in the high-level treatment group who chose to participate in services. A fourth limitation was a skew in the parents who participated in the follow-up telephone interview who were more likely to consist of custodial parents, those who were previously married, and those who lived more than 50 miles from their children. Finally, some of the analyses suffered from small sample sizes, particularly those that involved data from the follow-up telephone interview.

### **Key Findings**

**It is challenging both to get child support staff to identify noncustodial parents who have visitation problems and parents to come forward.**

After decades of being told that the child support agency does not deal with visitation issues, it is difficult to get parents and workers to change their behavior. Noncustodial parents are skeptical of an offer of help with visitation from the child support agency. Child support workers are initially ambivalent about the legitimacy and value of identifying parents with problems and making referrals for help. Child access specialists tried to be visible to child support workers and used pizza parties, dress-down privileges, and other incentives to encourage referral activity. Administrators concede that while the project was a “good start,” addressing visitation issues at the child support agency represents a “cultural change” that will require more time and effort.

**Most parents who disclose parenting time problems are unmarried, employed full time, and have extremely low incomes.**

On average, parents who disclosed parenting problems were 35 years old. Half were white, 15 percent were African-American, and a third was Hispanic. Two-thirds had never been married to the other parent. Half were high school graduates, and three-quarters were employed on a full-time basis, working an average of 40 hours per week. A small fraction held second jobs (7%). Despite the prevalence of full-time employment, 20 percent had personal incomes that fell below \$10,000 per year. A quarter reported incomes that fell between \$10,000 and \$20,000 per year.



More than a third (38%) had incomes that were between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year. Only 16 percent reported personal incomes that exceeded \$30,000 per year. Not surprisingly, more than half of enrolled noncustodial parents reported that their income did not cover their financial needs and a third indicated that they had problems with paying child support.

**It is difficult to deliver services to noncustodial parents who say that they have problems with visitation, the chief barrier being the refusal of many custodial parents to cooperate.**

In Jefferson County, only 37 percent of noncustodial parents scheduled for high-level treatment were served, while in El Paso County, the percentage of parents that was served was 30 percent. A fraction of the noncustodial parents in each county were excluded (5% to 15%) due to safety considerations such as domestic violence and/or criminal history. Jefferson County eliminated some cases (7%) because one parent lived outside of Colorado. The biggest reason most remaining, eligible cases did not receive services, however, was the custodial parent's refusal to respond and/or cooperate. This was the case for 71 percent of the eligible, non-served cases in El Paso County and 68 percent of the eligible, non-served cases in Jefferson County. In both counties, 30 percent of eligible cases were not served because the noncustodial parent failed to cooperate, respond, or follow through.

**Custodial parents are least apt to respond to and/or cooperate with efforts to improve parenting time when the level of conflict with the other parent is high and levels of pre-program contact with the children are low.**

While prior marital status was not predictive of participation, custodial parents were significantly less likely to cooperate with efforts to improve parenting time when parental relationships were characterized as conflicted or there was no contact between the parties. They were also less apt to participate when the other parent had not been seeing the children regularly, lived further away, and/or had visitation problems that were characterized as "denied visits."

**The willingness of custodial parents to participate in access and visitation services increases with the education, employment, and earning level of the noncustodial parent.**

The proportion of custodial parents that cooperated with services to improve parenting time was significantly higher among cases that involved noncustodial parents who were educated to the high school level or higher, worked full time, and earned \$20,000 per year or more.



**Printed information on access and visitation are perceived to be helpful to many parents.**

Two-thirds of interviewed parents in the low-level treatment group who received printed materials on access and visitation reported using the information to set up contact with the other parent, make visits go better, and keep track of visits. Only a quarter (23%) reported calling any of the referrals that were provided. Nearly all characterized the information as useful.

**Facilitation services are flexible interventions that are effective ways to solve parenting-time problems.**

Among parents that pursued facilitation services, the percentage that produced an agreement was 68 percent in Jefferson County and 82 percent in El Paso County. In Jefferson, the average facilitation was conducted with both parents in an in-person format lasting 1.7 sessions and 102 minutes. In El Paso, the typical facilitation was done by telephone and took only 1.1 sessions lasting 22 minutes. While the CAS in Jefferson County usually developed a standard parenting plan and filed it with the court for promulgation as a court order, the CAS in El Paso County frequently developed more individualistic write-ups that were kept as informal agreements between the parents and never entered with the court. The key topics that were addressed in facilitation sessions were the visitation schedule, telephone contact with the children, ways to improve communication and co-parenting, and the importance of consistent visitation.

**Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with facilitation and mediation services.**

Nearly three-quarters of interviewed parents who participated in facilitation reported being “very” (40%) or “somewhat” (31%) satisfied with the help they received. The most common topics that were discussed were setting up a parenting time plan and a specific schedule for visits, communicating with the other parent, arguing in front of the children, and child support and financial issues. Those who participated in mediation were also satisfied, with 74 percent of members of the high-level treatment group and 84 percent of low-level treatment group saying they were very or somewhat satisfied.

**Substantial proportions of parents will use mediation services if they are free and parent education services if they are required by the court.**

Half of interviewed parents in the low-level treatment group Jefferson County reported meeting with a mediator to talk about parenting time, and a similar proportion reported attending a class dealing with co-parenting. Jefferson County offered free mediation services to parents in the child support caseload; the court required parents who wanted to file a parenting plan to attend a free class on co-parenting and the negative impact of conflict on children. Previous research





shows that despite high levels of user satisfaction, parents rarely attend education programs unless they are required to do so by the court.

**It was rare for parents to go to court about parenting time, and those who did reported a good deal of dissatisfaction.**

Only a small fraction of parents in each county (14% to 19%) reported that they had gone to court or were scheduled to go about parenting time. While the most common outcome was getting a parenting time plan, about half were told to go to mediation, parent education class, or had their case rescheduled. Nearly half reported being somewhat or very dissatisfied with their court experiences. Previous research shows that confidence in the courts declines with exposure.

**Contact with children and parental relationships improve over time, and are significantly better for those who reach agreements and develop parenting plans in facilitation.**

A comparison of parent reports of parental relationships and parent-child contact patterns in the months prior to and following enrollment in the project suggests that all groups experience improvements over time. Parents in the low-level treatment group and the POP group reported improvements in parent-child contact that were statistically significant; parents in the high- and low-level treatment group reported improvements in parental relationships that were statistically significant. The group that reported the most substantial increases in contact with children and improved relationships was parents in the high-level treatment group who were able to generate parenting plans in facilitation sessions.

**Views of the child support agency are significantly better among parents who produce parenting plans, as compared with their counterparts who fail to reach agreements.**

While project participation in and of itself did not lead to improvements in the image of the child support agency, parents who were successful in producing parenting plans reported holding more favorable views than their counterparts who attempted but failed to reach such agreements.

**Child support payments increased significantly following program enrollment for all groups with those with and without parenting plans showing identical payment patterns.**

Six, 12, and 18 months following program enrollment, the child support payment rate was significantly higher for cases in every group: those in the high-level treatment group that received services, those in the high-level treatment group that were not serviced, those in the low-level treatment group, and those in POP. In a similar vein, the percentage paying nothing declined at



every time point. Those in the high-level treatment group who produced parenting plans exhibited increases in payment that were identical to those who attempted but failed to produce parenting plans. One interpretation of these results is that payment patterns are unrelated to the provision of access services. Another interpretation is that payment increased because members of every treatment group had an opportunity to talk about their visitation problems with someone at child support and received at least a referral for help.

**Increases in child support payment following program enrollment tracked with enforcement activity in every group.**

Payments rose significantly for cases in every group that had been subject to a driver's license suspension and/or a contempt action initiated in the 12 months following enrollment in the program. Among cases without such enforcement activity, payments were only significantly higher for cases in the low-level treatment group. This group was disproportionately composed of cases that were flagged at court hearings dealing with nonpayment and entered the project with a high level of enforcement activity underway that had already been initiated.

**Conclusions**

**To expand referral activities at child support agencies, changes in agency culture and federal reimbursement policies are needed.**

The Colorado Parenting Time Project reveals that child support agencies can incorporate specialized staff to help parents with visitation problems. Once staff has experience with specialized access workers, their presence at the agency is not perceived to compromise efficiencies and/or case processing time frames. Indeed, once they become accustomed to making referrals, staff appreciate the resource and believe that it serves an important customer service function. Nevertheless, identifying parenting time problems and making referrals represents a change in culture for child support workers. It will take more time and exposure to instill these new behaviors. It will also take federal direction. Minimally, this requires allowing referral and services activities dealing with visitation to qualify for federal reimbursement.

**Printed information about visitation problems and community resources are helpful, if there are free resources in the community.**

The lack of a low-level treatment group in El Paso County and the availability and utilization of free mediation services by members of the low-level treatment group in Jefferson County make it difficult to assess the effectiveness of only distributing printed information about visitation and community resources. It appears that a substantial proportion of parents viewed these materials as at least somewhat helpful, although the results might have been different if the project had



been conducted in counties that were less well-serviced and lacked free mediation and free education programs for parents who are separated and/or divorced.

**Better methods are needed to compel custodial parents to participate in interventions to address parenting-time problems.**

The fact that 70 percent of cases that were eligible to be served in the project failed to receive services because the custodial parents did not respond or refused to cooperate underscores the importance of developing ways to compel custodial parents to participate in efforts to examine and resolve visitation problems. Minimally, such noncustodial parents need to gain access to the courts and assistance with filing *pro se* actions aimed at requiring the other parent to participate in facilitation or mediation. The threat of possible court action might convince some custodial parents to cooperate even though most cases will settle and never advance to court action.

**Access interventions can help improve parent-child contact patterns, parental relationships, and the image of the child support agency.**

The project revealed that parent-child contact and parental relationships improve over time, and that those who resolve their parenting time problems reap the greatest gains in access and relationships. These parents also change their views of the child support agency in significant and positive ways.

**The absence of a true low-level treatment group and the failure to adhere to a strict random assignment scheme makes it difficult to draw definite conclusions about the impact of access and visitation services on child support payments.**

Child support payments increased significantly for every group of noncustodial parents, including those who were excluded from the project or did not appear for facilitation services. More to the point, the increases exceeded those observed for the total caseload with monthly support orders in Jefferson and El Paso counties. Since every group received some level of assistance by the child access specialist and/or referral to free community services, it was impossible to compare payment activity for a non-treatment group or a group that only received printed information. Another complication with the analysis was the lack of randomization in Jefferson County where the low-level treatment group was drawn disproportionately from cases at the court being heard for nonpayment problems. As a result, we cannot reliably assess the relationship between visitation services and child support payments. One interpretation of the project findings is that services are unrelated to payments. Another interpretation is that payments improved for all groups because someone at the child support agency acknowledged the importance of visitation and tried to help. Still a third interpretation is that payments



improved because of heightened attention to all cases in the project and the initiation of enforcement actions in a timely manner.

**More research is needed.**

It will take more research with more careful attention to random assignment schemes and the generation of a true control group to develop more definitive conclusions about the relationship between access services and child support payments. Lacking parents with higher levels of income, it was also impossible to test whether access services might have improved child support payments for those with greater resources. Hopefully, these questions will be addressed in future studies that are conducted with a true control group and a population of parents that possess a wider range of incomes and financial resources.

