

# Child adjustment in divorced families

## Can we successfully intervene among Dutch 6- to 8-year-olds?

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### INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce impacts strongly on children. Children with divorced parents score significantly lower on measures of wellbeing, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social relations (Amato & James, 2010). This study aimed at evaluating the effects of preventive group intervention 'Dappere Dino's™' for 6 to 8 years old children in the Dutch setting.



### PROBLEM DEFINITION

- In the Netherlands, > 70,000 at-home-living children involved in parental divorce or separation each year (Spruijt & Kormos, 2014).
- Evidence-based programs to support young children after parental divorce are rare (e.g., Cloostermans et al., 2013).
- U.S.-developed Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) is one of these (Pedro-Carroll, 2005).
- CODIP's effectiveness outside U.S. to be further replicated (e.g., Klein Velderman et al., 2016).
- Dappere Dino's is an adapted CODIP module (i.e., CODIP-Netherlands [CODIP-NL]) for 6- to 8-year-olds (Pedro-Carroll & Klein Velderman, 2015).

### METHOD

- Quasi-experimental study
- N = 283 children, 152 boys (53.7%) and 131 girls (46.3%)
- Age, M = 7.33 (SD = 0.82)
- Most parents born in the Netherlands (90.0% of mothers, 89.7% of fathers)
- Children participated in one of three groups:
  - 108 in experimental group (E) supported in 19 intervention groups (3-8 children each)
  - 37 in divorce control group (DC)
  - 138 in two-parent non-divorced family comparison group
- Half of the mothers with high education (50% in E, DC; 62.2% in NDC)
- Pre- and post-test measures:
  - Child positive functioning (Parent Evaluation Form (PEF), range 1-4; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1989; and Group Leader Evaluation Form (GLEF), range 1-4; Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989)
  - Child well-being (Cantril ladder, range 1-10; Cantril, 1965)
  - Child psychological adaptation (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire Parent Form (SDQ-PF); Goodman, 1997)
- Results presented based on mother (PEF, Cantril, SDQ-PF) and group leader reports (GLEF, Cantril).

### INTERVENTION

- 12 weekly 45-minutes group sessions
- Two group leaders per group
- Use of puppet play, reading books, games, play cards, drawing, and more.
- Aim: preventing divorce-related problems by
  - creating a supportive group environment and
  - enhancing problem solving skills.
- Based on theories of play therapy, developmental psychology, stress and coping, resilience promotion, and research on risk and protective factors.
- For parents: one session, newsletters, intake, uptake
- Scientifically validated (theoretically well underpinned) in Dutch database of effective youth interventions
- First pilot study received national ZonMw 'Pearl Award' for strong innovative power (March 2013)

### RESULTS

See Table 1

- **Positive functioning (group leader – GLEF)**
  - E's competencies increased ( $p < .001$ )
  - E's overall adjustment increased ( $p < .001$ )
- **Positive functioning (mother – PEF)**
  - E's positive functioning increased ( $p < .001$ ).
  - E's positive functioning > DC (pretest only) and NDC (pre- and posttest)
  - E's pretest to posttest increases in positive functioning exceeded those of DC ( $p < .001$ ) and NDC ( $p < .001$ )

### Wellbeing (Cantril)

- E's wellbeing increased ( $p < .001$ ; mother and group leader reports)
- E's wellbeing < DC (pretest) and NDC (pre- and posttest)
- E's pretest to posttest increases in wellbeing exceeded those of DC ( $p < .001$ ) and NDC ( $p < .001$ ); see Figure 1
- **Emotional and behavioral problems (SDQ)**
  - E's emotional problems decreased ( $p = .02$ )
  - E's conduct problems decreased ( $p = .02$ )
  - E's total difficulties decreased ( $p = .001$ )
  - E's pretest to posttest decreases in emotionality exceeded those of DC ( $p = .04$ ) and NDC ( $p = .03$ )
  - E's pretest to posttest decreases in conduct problems exceeded those of NDC ( $p = .03$ )
  - E's pretest to posttest decreases in hyperactivity exceeded those of DC ( $p = .04$ )
  - E's pretest to posttest decreases in total difficulties exceeded those of DC ( $p < .01$ ) and NDC ( $p < .01$ ); see Figure 2

### All measures

- No DC or NDC pretest to posttest differences found

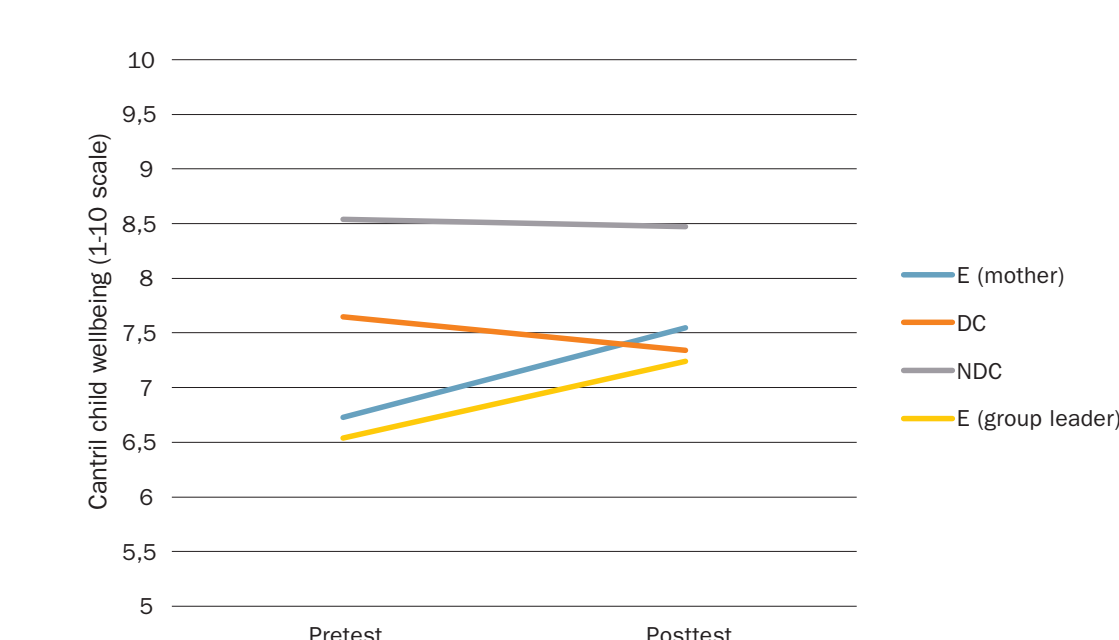


Figure 1. Mother and group leader (E only) reported pretest to posttest Cantril wellbeing scores for experimental (E), divorce control (DC) and non-divorced control (NDC) subjects.

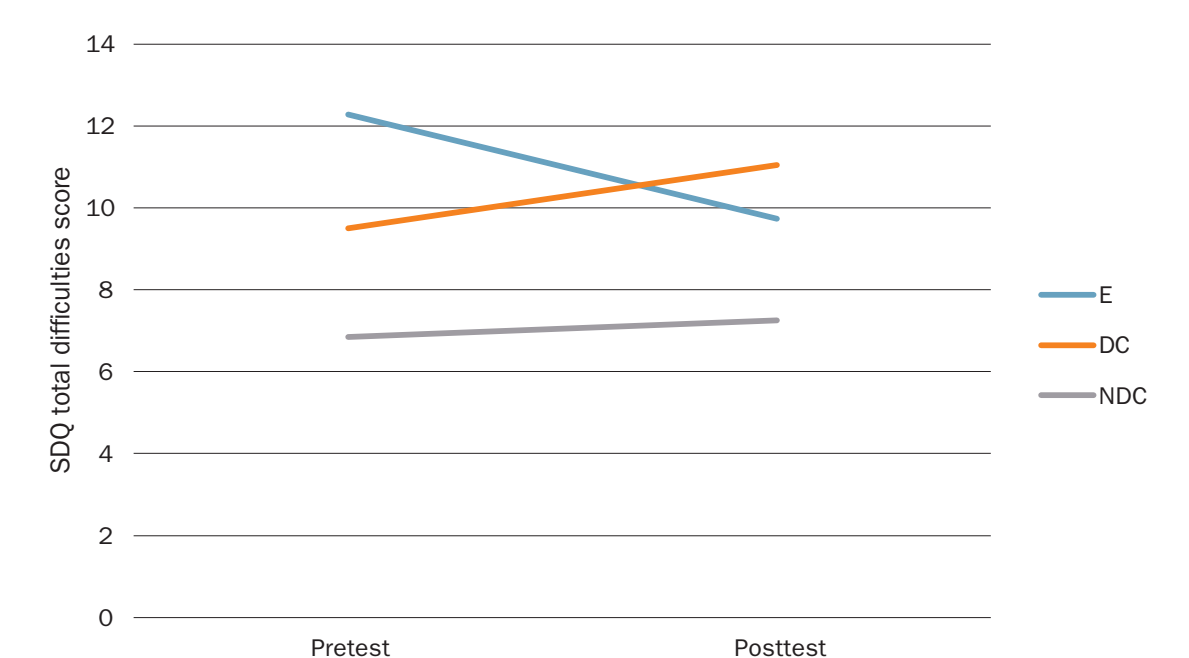


Figure 2. Mother reported pretest to posttest SDQ total difficulties scores for experimental (E), divorce control (DC) and non-divorced control (NDC) subjects.

### CONCLUSION

After parental divorce, a 12-session preventive group intervention Dappere Dino's™ – that is, CODIP-NL for 6- to 8-year-olds – can be efficacious in promoting children's emotional well-being and positive functioning, and reducing their emotional and behavioral problems.

### DISCUSSION

- Results based on mother and group leader data only.
- Quasi-experimental design, no random assignment to groups.
- Despite noteworthy changes after intervention, children participating in Dappere Dino's™ still experienced lower well-being, and showed less positive functioning and more problems than children growing up in intact families. No follow-up data is available on changes over time.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of pretest, posttest outcomes, and of pre- to posttest differences, including statistical significance based on first exploratory tests.

Measure	Experimental (E)					Divorce control (DC)					Non-divorced family comparison (NDC)								
	N	Pre M (SD)	N	Post M (SD)	N	Post-Pre M (SD) <sup>a</sup>	N	Pre M (SD) <sup>b</sup>	N	Post M (SD) <sup>b</sup>	N	Post-Pre M (SD) <sup>b</sup>	N	Pre M (SD) <sup>b</sup>	N	Post M (SD) <sup>b</sup>	N	Post-Pre M (SD) <sup>b</sup>	
GLEF	105		92		90														
Problems		2.84 (0.58)		3.04 (0.63)		0.19** (0.55)													
Competencies		3.01 (0.58)		3.40 (0.63)		0.39** (0.59)													
Overall adjustment		2.92 (0.44)		3.21 (0.53)		0.29** (0.38)													
PEF	73	2.27 (0.38)	62	2.53 (0.42)	59	0.26** (0.32)	28	2.57** (0.45)	25	2.54 (0.47)	25	-0.03** (0.26)	116	2.89** (0.37)	94	2.83** (0.37)	93	-0.03** (0.25)	
Cantril																			
By Group leader	105	6.54 (1.03)	92	7.24 (1.03)	90	0.69** (0.94)													
By Mother	72	6.73 (1.19)	61	7.55 (1.01)	57	0.77** (1.02)	26	7.65** (1.11)	22	7.34 (1.30)	20	-0.15** (0.61)	113	8.54** (0.97)	92	8.47** (0.84)	90	-0.01** (0.88)	
SDQ	72		62		59		26		24		22		113		94		92		
Emotionality		3.69 (2.40)		3.00 (2.40)		-0.71* (2.19)		2.50* (1.86)		2.88 (2.44)		0.23* (1.82)		1.80** (2.07)		1.88** (1.99)		-0.04* (1.55)	
Conduct problems		2.21 (1.84)		1.68 (1.51)		-0.56* (1.74)		1.77 (1.84)		1.96 (2.01)		0.09 (1.23)		1.00** (1.32)		1.03* (1.38)		-0.01* (1.40)	
Hyperactivity		4.53 (2.85)		3.76 (3.01)		-0.47 (2.03)		3.65 (2.68)		4.25 (2.64)		0.50* (2.02)		3.25** (2.72)		3.47 (2.83)		0.11 (1.70)	
Peer problems		1.85 (1.77)		1.29 (1.41)		-0.27 (1.34)		1.58 (1.96)		1.96 (2.35)		0.36 (1.43)		0.81** (1.25)		0.87 (1.34)		0.02 (1.45)	
Prosocial behavior		7.94 (1.75)		8.24 (1.70)		0.19 (1.71)		8.08 (1.32)		7.83 (1.88)		-0.18 (1.62)		8.27 (1.62)		8.04 (1.79)		-0.05 (1.59)	
Total difficulties		12.28 (6.39)		9.73 (5.54)		-2.02* (4.55)		9.50* (6.41)		11.04 (7.26)		1.18** (4.06)		6.85** (5.32)		7.26** (5.30)		0.08** (4.14)	

a. Pretest-posttest outcomes were compared using paired t-tests. b. For PEF, Cantril, and SDQ PF, one-way ANOVA's with contrast test (E as reference category) were used to evaluate between group differences. Statistical significance of contrast t-tests are marked in this table in the DC and NDC columns. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed significance.