

# Promotion of Resilience for Children of Divorce

Irwin Sandler

ASU Prevention Research Center

Supported by grants from the National  
Institute of Mental Health NIMH Grant P30  
MH39246, R01 MH057012

For further information contact Irwin Sandler at 602-448-0922 or  
By e-mail at [irwin.sandler@asu.edu](mailto:irwin.sandler@asu.edu).

By mail at Prevention Research Center, Department of Psychology,  
Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287-1104

# Overview of Presentation

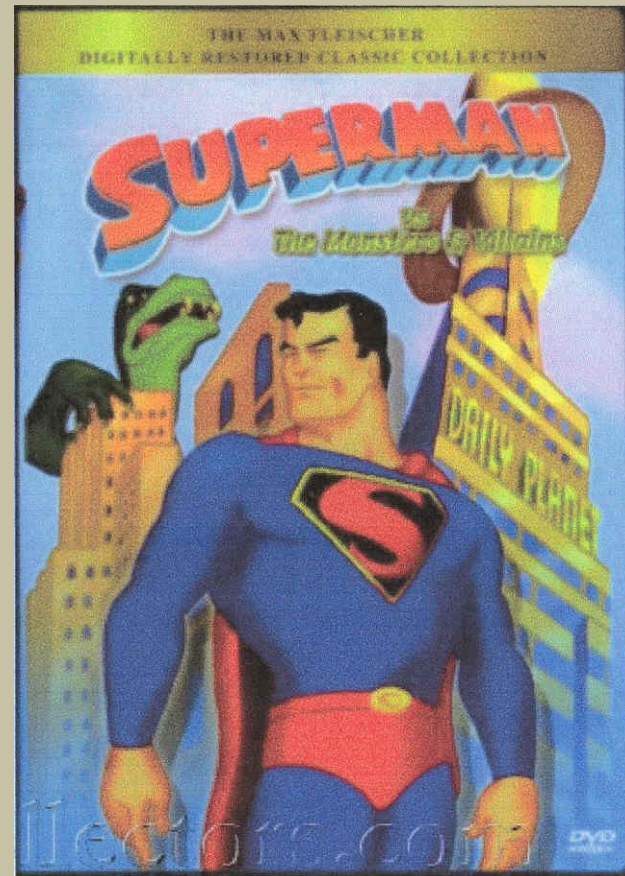
- I. What do we mean by resilience? Where does it come from?
- II. Can we promote resilience for children in stressful situations? Parental divorce as a case example.
  - I. How can we do it?
  - II. What's the evidence that it works?
- III. Can we deliver a program to promote resilience to families? Will the families use it?

# Children Grow Up in Stressful Times

- Many children in America are exposed to serious stressful situations
- While some suffer serious problems others adapt well despite the stressors in their lives
- Resilience is a term we use to refer to those who adapt well despite the stressors in their lives
- Two ways to think about resilience:
  - Superman model
  - Contextual model

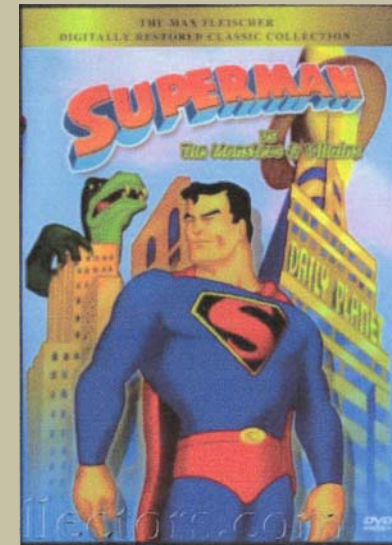
# Superman Model of Resilience

- Both parents died while he was a baby
- Whole community killed
- Sent away to live with strangers
- Yet – because of his personality of steel grows up to be healthy, strong, and highly pro-social adult



# Superman is the wrong model for resilience!

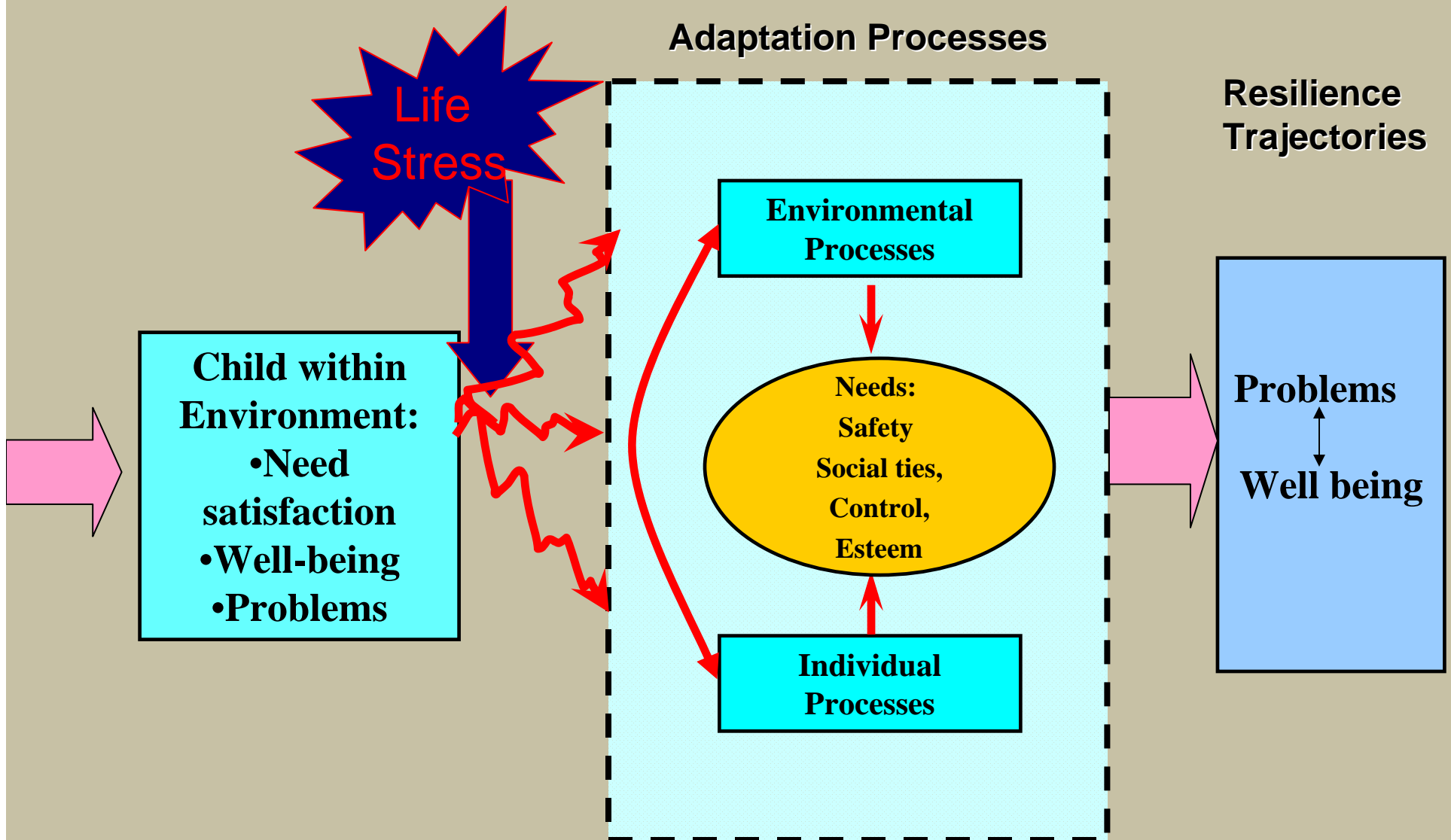
- Resilience is not simply a characteristic of individuals!
- Resilience is a process which involves individual and social environmental forces.
- Superman had:
  - *personal strengths,*
  - *nurturing parents*
  - *healthy community in which to grow!*
- Imagine the outcome if he did not have nurturing parents or a healthy community?



# Contextual Model of Resilience

- Adversities disrupt how children satisfy normal needs
  - **Physical safety**
  - **Security of social relations (parents and peers)**
  - **Self-worth**
  - **Control, etc.**
- Adaptation involves reorganizing internal world (beliefs about relationships, self-worth, etc.) and environmental relations to find new ways to satisfy needs – children can adapt in healthy or unhealthy ways
- *Resilience* involves adaptation in ways that lead to healthy satisfaction of needs and positive well-being – low problems (e.g. depression, substance use) and positive accomplishment of developmental tasks (e.g., success in school, peer, etc.)

# Contextual Resilience Model



# Parental Divorce as a Case Example of Resilience

- **Approximately 35% of children experience parental divorce**
- **Divorce is associated with increases in many problem outcomes for children: mental health problems, substance use and abuse, school problems, high risk sexual behavior**
- **However – most children are resilient following divorce – about 75% adjust well while 25% experience ongoing problems**

# What factors lead to child resilience following divorce?

- Low inter-parental conflict
- Effective parenting by mother
- Effective parenting by father
- Effective coping on the part of children
- Low parent mental health problems
- Low economic stress in the family

# Three Critical Questions

- 1. Can we build programs to promote resilience?**
- 2. Can we demonstrate that they work to improve children's lives?**
- 3. Can we deliver them to children and families?**

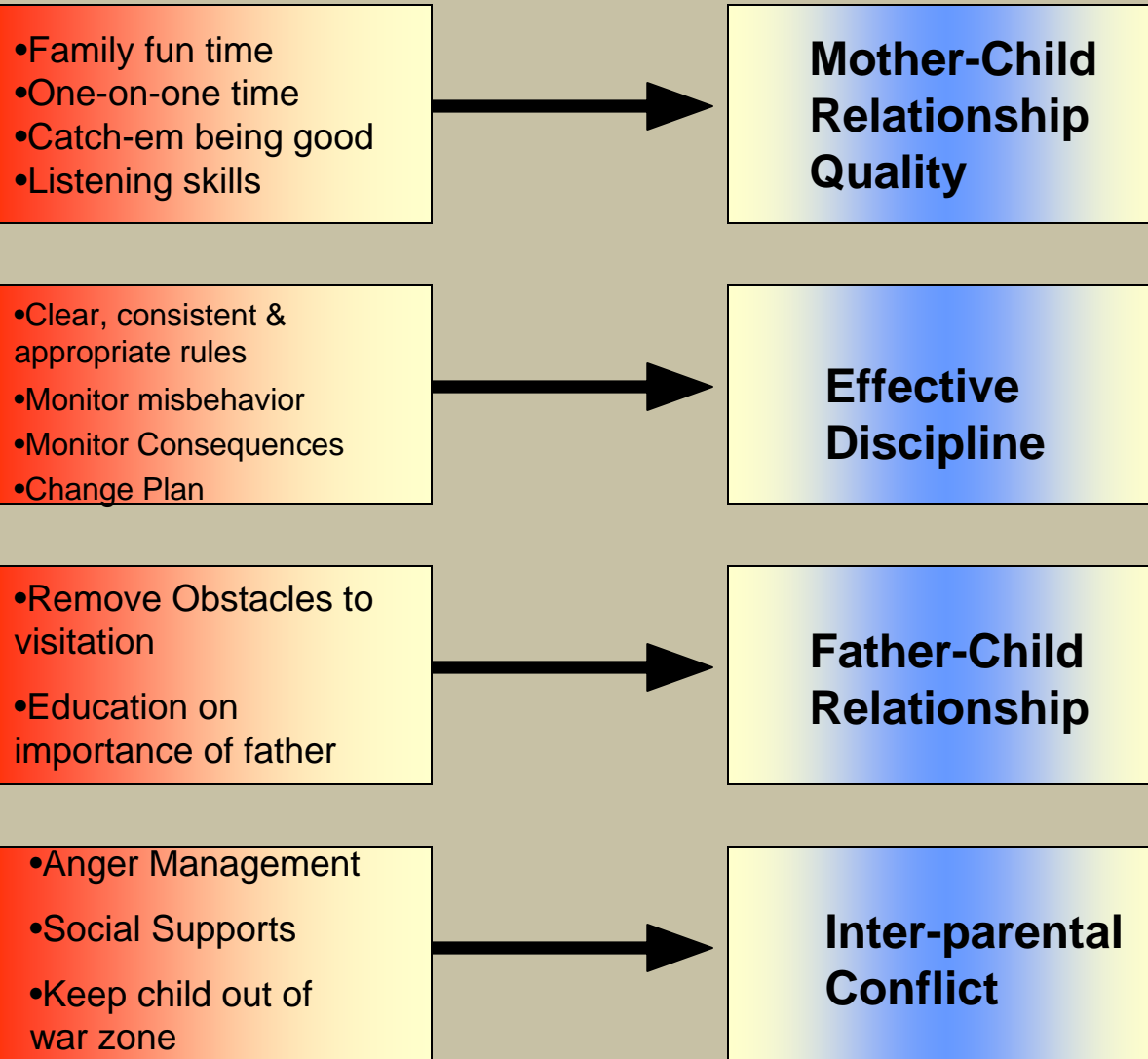
# New Beginnings Program: Promoting Resilience for Children Following Parental Divorce

- Works with divorced mothers
- Focuses on building resilience resources
  - Parental warmth
  - Effective discipline
  - Support contact with father
  - Decrease interparental conflict

# New Beginnings Program: Promoting Resilience for Children Following Divorce

## New Beginnings Program

## Resilience Resource



# Research Evaluation of New Beginnings Program

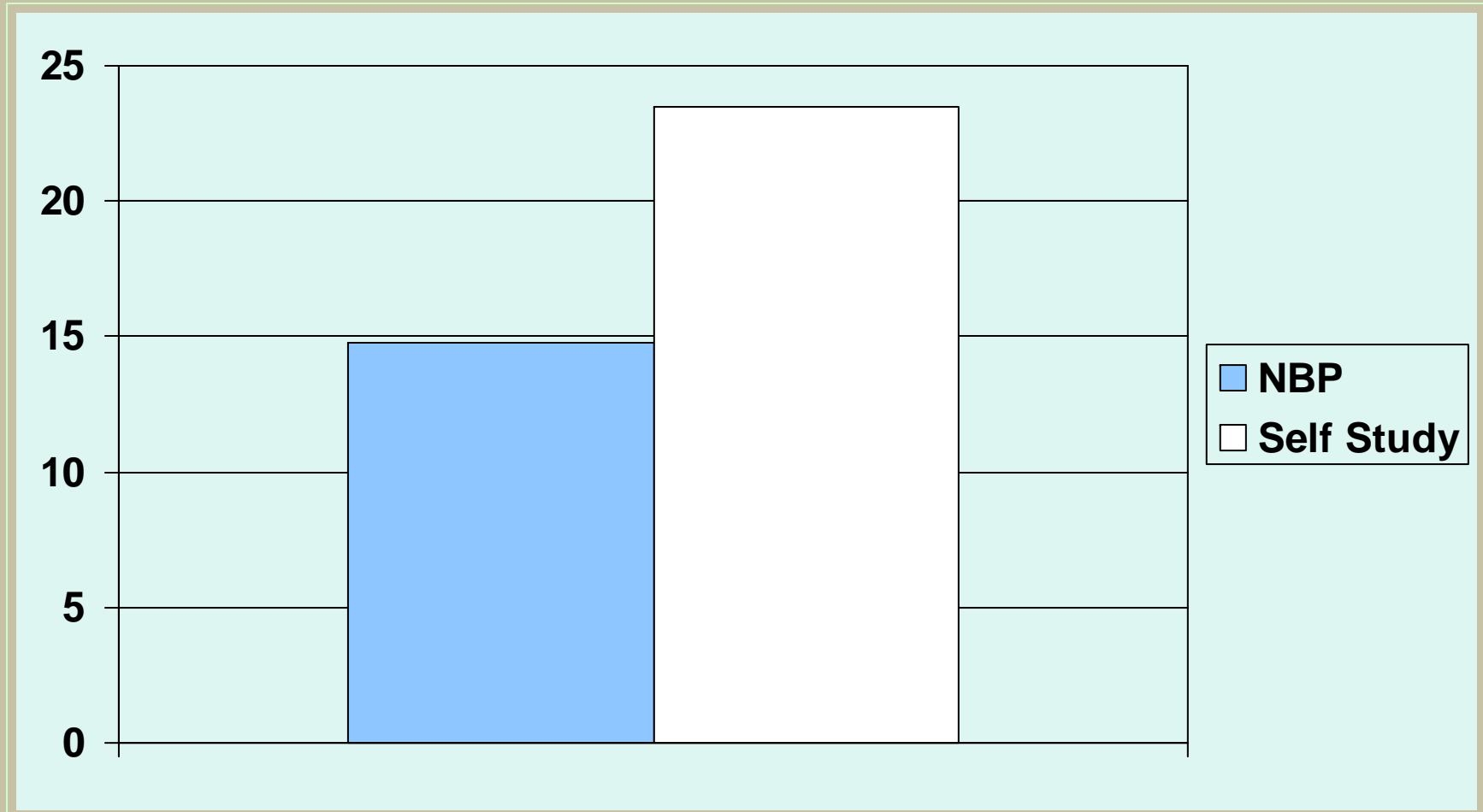
- Evaluated in an experimental trial involving 240 children (age 9-12)
- Assessed children in the program and those who did not receive the program at 5 points
  - ✓ Pre
  - ✓ Post
  - ✓ 3 Months
  - ✓ 6 Months
  - ✓ 6 Years (age 15 – 18)
  - ✓ *14 Years (23 – 26) – In Progress*

# Results 6 Years Following Program Participation

**Children whose parents were in the program had fewer problems and better adjustment as compared to those whose parents did not receive the program**

- **37% reduction in 1-year prevalence of diagnosed mental disorder on C-DISC**
- **Improve Grade Point Average (50% increase in number of students with A or B average in high school)**
- **Improved self-esteem**
- **Reduce Number of Sexual Partners**
- **Reduced alcohol, marijuana and drug use (for those who were most at risk)**

# One Year Prevalence of Diagnosed Mental Disorder (C-DISC)



# Question IV: Can we deliver New Beginnings to Divorcing Families? Partner with Family Courts?

- ✓ Institutional Partner for Dissemination: Domestic Relations Court – they have a monopoly on divorce!
- ✓ We are both interested in promoting resilience of children following divorce

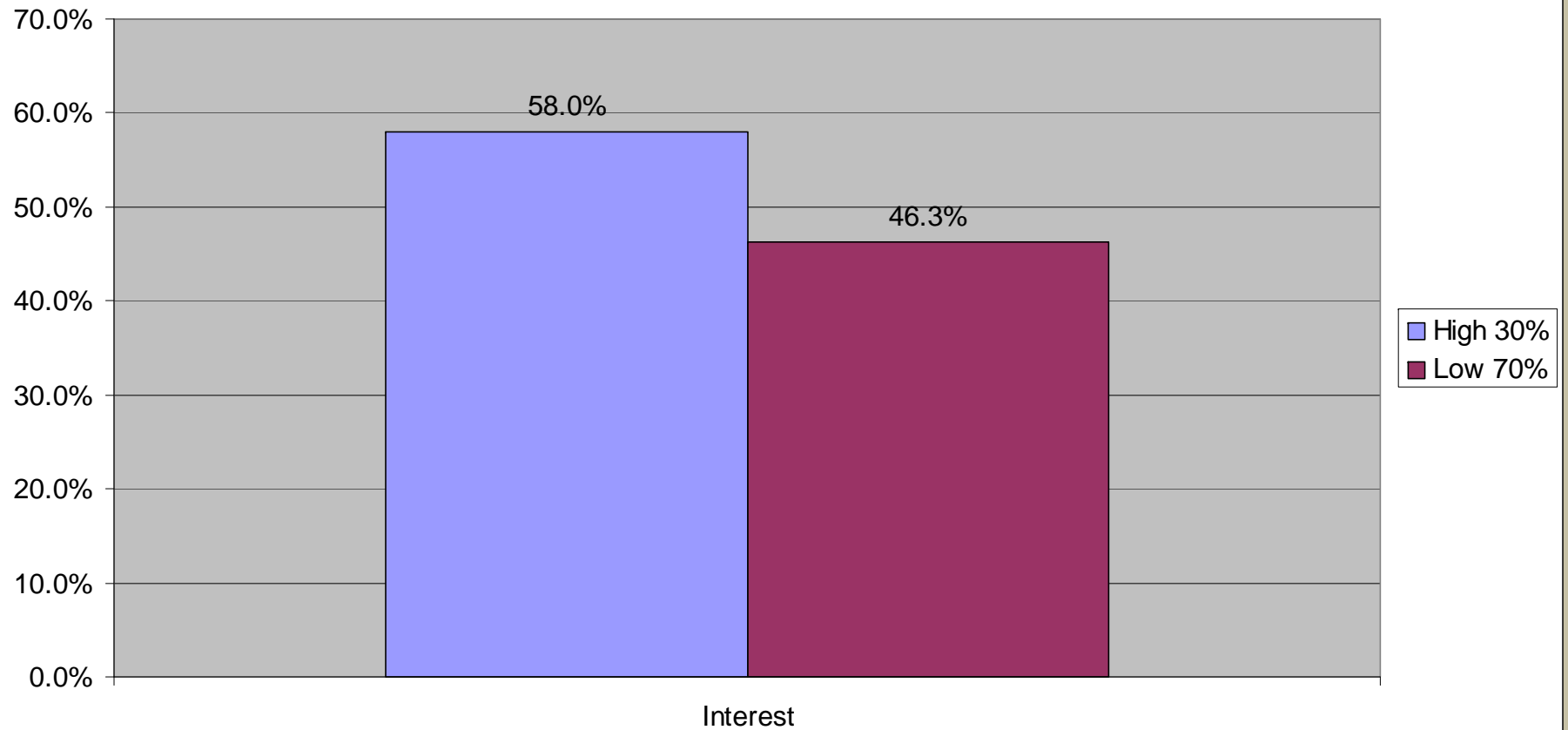
# Short-to-Long Recruitment Study (Collaboration with Maricopa Court)

- Many family courts have “short” parenting programs for divorcing families
- Some (including Maricopa County) mandate a short (4 hour) program
- Evaluations of these programs find high level of satisfaction but little evidence of impact on child well-being
- Research question: Can we use this “short” mandatory program as a platform to recruiting to a longer – “effective” voluntary program?
- Develop videos based recruitment using social psychology compliance techniques

# Short to Long Preliminary Results

- Overall 50% of families express positive interest in participating in the program either immediately or next year
- Participants fill out screening measure to assess “risk” – level of conflict, child and parent mental health problems, etc.
- For 30% highest conflict
  - 59% expressed positive interest (46% for low risk)

### Interest Levels for High Conflict Group (30%) vs. Low Conflict Group (70%)



# Summary

- Contextual model of resilience – multiple resources for resilience – child, family and community
- We can develop programs to promote resilience: Example of New Beginnings Program for children of divorce
- Resilience promotion programs can have long term benefits for children
- Need partnerships of agencies that serve children and families to deliver resilience promotion programs to families who can use them