The National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds’ Research Review is an online resource from the Alliance to help state Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds and their partners stay up-to-date on the latest research and innovative approaches in the field of child abuse and neglect prevention. State prevention leaders at Children’s Trust Funds across the country told us in 2010 that bridging the gap between research and practice was a critical need. The Research Review is one of the Alliance’s responses to that request.

In each issue, we summarize selected recently published prevention-related articles and provide very brief notes on the findings of additional recently published articles. We also link to research-related resources from other national prevention partners.

This issue’s “Spotlight on Parenting Education and Support: Research and Practice” explores parenting education and support.

“The Research-Savvy Practitioner” article in this edition considers why prevention professionals should pay attention to findings about the lifelong consequences of child maltreatment and other adverse childhood experiences.

Please contact your state Children’s Trust Fund (find contact information here) to request to be alerted when new issues are released.

This and all previous editions are posted on the Alliance website at ctfalliance.org/researchreview. If you received this email from a colleague and would like to to get announcements of future issues, please click here and provide your email address.

We hope the Research Review is a useful resource for you and we welcome your suggestions, questions and feedback. Please send any communications to researchreview@ctfalliance.org.

PREVENTION RESEARCH ARTICLE SUMMARIES

Stay on top of recently published scholarly articles related to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Each listing below includes:

- the bottom line of what you need to know about the article
- a practitioner-friendly summary of the article, and
- in most cases the authors’ abstract from the journal, as well as a link to view or purchase the full article.
You will also see brief summaries of the findings of additional studies, with links to view abstracts and purchase or view the articles.

PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

FINDINGS IN PROGRAM EVALUATIONS:

- Parents trained and hired as peer facilitators of a parenting intervention called Being a Parent were able to effectively deliver the program to parents in an underserved area of London, England. Parent participants who completed the program reported improvements in child behavior and parenting stress and were satisfied with the program. The model is described as a promising approach to reaching underserved populations with evidence-based parenting information. (Day, C., Michelson, D., Thomson, S., Penney, C. & Draper, L. (2012). Innovations in practice: Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities: A pilot evaluation of a peer-led parenting programme. Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 17(1), 52-57. Available for purchase at http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2011.00619.x)

- Mothers who received age-paced parenting newsletters produced by Extension during their children’s second and third years of life reported reading the newsletters, sharing them with their social networks, and making changes in their parenting behaviors as a result of what they read. All of these findings were stronger for first-time mothers than for experienced mothers. Over half of mothers rated the newsletters as a “very useful” source of information. (Ostergren, C. S. & Riley, D. A. (2012). Testing age-paced parenting newsletters up to age 3: Greater impact on first-time parents. Journal of Extension, 50(1), 1FEA9. Full text available at http://www.joe.org/joe/2012february/a9.php)

- Mothers participating in a parent training series showed similar gains in cognitive understanding of positive guidance techniques whether they received lectures only or an enhanced series incorporating hands-on training. However, those who received hands-on instruction made significant improvements in their application of positive guidance techniques, while lecture-only parents did not. This was true regardless of maternal depression status, stress level, and parenting attitudes. (Saunders, R., McFarland-Piazza, L., Jacobvitz, D., Hazen-Swann, N. & Burton, R. (in press). Maternal knowledge and behaviors regarding discipline: The effectiveness of a hands-on education program in positive guidance. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 1-13. Available for purchase at http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9581-5)

- Three new programs were reviewed by Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE) and found to meet the criteria for proven effectiveness. Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) Infant, the Early Start (New Zealand), and the Oklahoma Community-Based Family Resource and Support Program are now valid “evidence-based early childhood home visiting service delivery models” and may be implemented using federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visitation (MIECHV) program funds designated for evidence-based programs. More information, including a report about each model program, is available at http://homvee.acf.hhs.gov/.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR CHILD MALTREATMENT

**BOTTOM LINE:** Paternal risk factors for child neglect were found to be important even when controlling for maternal and household risk factors in two-parent families. The authors suggest that more attention to paternal depression and paternal parenting stress could prevent or reduce child neglect in two-parent families.

**SUMMARY:** This study of child neglect in two-parent families found that paternal risk factors for child neglect are important even when controlling for maternal and household risk factors in early childhood. In this group of 1,089 families with two resident biological parents, 12% of mothers reported at least one incident of neglectful behavior by the mother or father in the past year at child age 5. Among all families, 10% of fathers and 16% of mothers were depressed at child age 3; however, these rates were significantly higher (19% of fathers and 29% of mothers) in families where neglect was present at age 5. Paternal depression and other parenting risks (such as heavy alcohol use) at age 3 were associated with higher odds of child neglect at age 5, even when controlling for maternal depression, other maternal parenting risks, and economic hardship. Paternal report of parenting stress was also correlated with child neglect, but was a less significant factor when maternal parenting risks were taken into account. The authors suggest that more attention to paternal depression and paternal parenting stress could prevent or reduce child neglect in two-parent families.

**ABSTRACT:** Objective: To examine the association of paternal depression with risk for parental neglect of young children.

*Study design:* The sample was derived from a birth cohort study of 1,089 families in which both biological parents resided in the home when the target child was 3- and 5-years old. Prospective analyses examined the contribution of paternal and maternal parenting risks (e.g., depression, alcohol use, and parenting stress) to the incidence of neglect of the target child. Models accounted for a comprehensive set of factors associated with parental child neglect in 2-parent families, including quality of the parental relationship, household economic conditions, and paternal demographic characteristics.

*Results:* Approximately 12% of families reported at least 1 instance of neglect; 10% of fathers were depressed when their child was 3-years old. Rates of paternal and maternal depression were twice as high in families in which child neglect was present. Paternal depression when a child was 3-years old was associated with increased odds of child neglect at age 5 [adjusted odds ratio: 1.94 (95% confidence interval: 1.18-3.19); P < .01]. Father-related risks for neglect remained statistically significant after accounting for strong, significant effects of maternal parenting risks, including maternal depression, and household economic hardship. Paternal parenting stress was also associated with heightened risk for neglect, although only at the level of marginal significance after accounting for maternal parenting risks [adjusted odds ratio: 1.40 (95% confidence interval: 0.97-2.04); P = .075].
Conclusions: Screening fathers for parenting risks such as depression during well-baby visits and social work intervention to facilitate fathers’ help-seeking behaviors related to treatment of depression may help to prevent and reduce risk of neglect.


BOTTOM LINE: Researchers found a significant inverse relationship between family support and child maltreatment in a sample of almost 5,000 children in Chicago. The researchers also found that primary caregiver depression partially explained the relationship between family support and child maltreatment, particularly in neighborhoods with higher levels of violence. Interventions that improve parents’ relationships with other family members and interventions that alleviate parents’ depressive symptoms may hold promise for decreasing child maltreatment.

SUMMARY: Using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), researchers analyzed the relationship between social support from family members and child maltreatment. The PHDCN collected many types of data from the parents of more than 6,000 children over three waves of data collection in the 1990s. This study focuses on 4,960 children who were between the ages of 3 and 15 in the first wave of the PHDCN. Their parents responded to the Provision of Social Relationships Scale, consisting of 6 items such as “I know my family will always stand by me,” and the Conflict Tactics Scale, often used to measure abusive or neglectful parenting behaviors. A significant inverse relationship was found between family support and child maltreatment, as expected. The researchers also found that primary caregiver depression partially explained the relationship between family support and child maltreatment, particularly in neighborhoods with higher levels of violence. That is, especially in more violent neighborhoods, parents who received higher levels of support from their families were less likely to be depressed, leading to lower likelihood of child maltreatment. In neighborhoods with less violence, the direct path from social support to child maltreatment was significant, but the mediated path through caregiver depression was insignificant. The researchers suggest that interventions that improve parents’ relationships with other family members and interventions that alleviate parents’ depressive symptoms hold promise for decreasing child maltreatment.

ABSTRACT: Previous research has linked parents’ social support to decreased child maltreatment, but questions remain surrounding the mechanisms explaining this association. Furthermore, it is unclear whether this association applies to support provided by family alone (and not friends), and whether it is moderated by the presence of neighborhood violence. Based on a sample of parents of children aged 3 to 15 years in Chicago, the authors find that parents’ family support is associated with a lower risk of child maltreatment. This association is partly mediated by reduced parental depression, but only in neighborhoods with average or high levels of violence. In neighborhoods with low levels of violence, the inverse association
between family support and maltreatment is equally strong, but it is not mediated by reduced depression.


**BOTTOM LINE:** Researchers found that maternal race, parenting attitudes, and children’s exposure to community violence combined to predict experiences of abuse among children of 70 adolescent mothers. Greater exposure to community violence predicted greater likelihood of abuse. Authoritarian parenting attitudes were related to lower likelihood of abuse among children of African American, but not Caucasian, mothers. The authors explore implications for parenting interventions and abuse prevention.

**SUMMARY:** Data were analyzed from 70 mother-child pairs in the Notre Dame Adolescent Parenting Project to examine the relationship between mothers’ reports of their own experience of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in childhoods and their 18-year-old children’s reports of abuse in their childhoods. (The focus here is on “intergenerational continuity” – the experience of maltreatment in subsequent generations of a family, regardless of who perpetrates the abuse or neglect. “Intergenerational transmission,” on the other hand, refers to perpetration of abuse or neglect by an adult who experienced maltreatment as a child.) Two-thirds of these low-income, adolescent mothers (66%) and close to half of their children (46%) reported a history of childhood abuse; 78% of the children who reported experiencing abuse had mothers who reported being victims themselves. Looking only at 42 mothers with an abuse history, researchers analyzed how maternal race, parenting attitudes, and children’s exposure to community violence combined to predict children’s experiences of abuse. Greater exposure to community violence predicted greater likelihood of abuse. Authoritarian parenting attitudes – that is, a parenting style valuing firm parental control and less warmth – were related to lower likelihood of abuse among children of African American, but not Caucasian, mothers. Previous research has supported the theory that parents’ use of firm control may be protective against a number of poor outcomes when raising children in unsafe environments. It is not clear why that protective mechanism functioned for African American families in this study but not for Caucasian families facing similar environmental risks. The researchers suggest that parenting interventions should be designed and implemented in a way that does not thwart what may be effective parenting approaches for some families. In particular, the authors suggest that parenting interventions could facilitate the development of authoritarian attitudes among high-risk African American mothers with a history of abuse, while still discouraging the use of physical punishment.

**ABSTRACT:** Among the negative sequelae of child maltreatment is increased risk for continuity of maltreatment into subsequent generations. Despite acknowledgment in the literature that the pathways toward breaking the cycle of maltreatment are likely the result of dynamic interactions of risk and protective factors across multiple ecological levels, few studies have followed high-
risk samples of maltreated and nonmaltreated parents over time to evaluate such processes. In the current investigation, exposure to community violence and authoritarian parenting attitudes were evaluated as predictors of the intergenerational continuity of abuse, and the moderating effect of African American race was examined. The sample included 70 mothers and their 18-year-old children, who have been followed longitudinally since the third trimester of the adolescent mothers’ pregnancy. Results revealed that among mothers with a child abuse history, higher exposure to community violence and lower authoritarian parenting attitudes were associated with increased risk for intergenerational continuity of abuse. The relation of authoritarian parenting attitudes to intergenerational continuity was moderated by race; the protective effects of authoritarian parenting were limited to the African American families only. The salience of multiple ecological levels in interrupting the intergenerational continuity of child abuse is discussed, and implications for preventive programs are highlighted.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS IN RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR CHILD MALTREATMENT:

🏠 Chinese women in Hong Kong who reported being victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) during pregnancy were more likely than non-abused counterparts to report physical abuse of their children, whether perpetrated by themselves or their partners, three years later. There was no association between prenatal IPV and child neglect. (Chan, K. L., Brownridge, D. A., Fong, D. Y. T., Tiwari, A., Leung, W. C. & Ho, P. C. (2012). Violence against pregnant women can increase the risk of child abuse: A longitudinal study. Child Abuse & Neglect, 36(4), 275-284. Available for purchase at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213412000683 )

🏠 Among children who were removed from their homes or deemed by CPS to have moderate to high risk of future victimization prior to age 4, two-thirds had at least one additional maltreatment report prior to age 12. Greater numbers of re-reports were found among children who, at age 4, had been victims of physical abuse, lived with a biological parent and step-parent, and had a higher number of children in the home. Parental alcohol abuse, depression, social isolation, and receipt of Aid to Families with Dependent Children at age 4 were also associated with higher numbers of re-reports between ages 4 and 12. (Proctor, L. J., Aarons, G. A., Dubowitz, H., English, D. J., Lewis, T., Thompson, R., et al. (2012). Trajectories of maltreatment re-reports from ages 4 to 12: Evidence for persistent risk after early exposure. Child Maltreatment, 17(3), 207-217. Available for purchase at http://cmx.sagepub.com/content/17/3/207)

🏠 Researchers found that parents’ unconscious reactions to reading vignettes that described a non-empathic child interaction and an inappropriate blaming of a child predicted child abuse potential differently than self-report measures. Based on self-report, measures of empathy and attribution of child culpability were both related to both child abuse potential and discipline decisions. However, parents’ unconscious reactions to the empathy vignette were only related to child abuse potential, and unconscious reactions to the culpability vignette were only

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

FINDINGS IN CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Child welfare workers in Minnesota were significantly more likely to believe that a situation met the state definition for neglect and should be reported to child protective services when shown a photo that included a black baby than when shown the same photo with either a white baby or no baby. Racialized perceptions of neglect by workers were found to have a statistically significant impact on county-level rates of disproportionate representation of African American children in the child welfare system. (Ards, S. D., Myers Jr, S. L., Ray, P., Kim, H.-E., Monroe, K. & Arteaga, I. (2012). Racialized perceptions and child neglect. Children and Youth Services Review, 34(8), 1480-1491. Available for purchase at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740912001417)

RESEARCH METHODS

FINDINGS IN RESEARCH METHODS & REFLECTIONS

Parents self-reported using aggressive parenting behaviors more often than indicated by their partners, comparing data from the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). There was greater consistency in reports of the use of the harshest behaviors, and mothers’ reports of fathers’ behaviors were more consistent with fathers’ own reports. These findings are useful in interpreting studies that rely on one parent’s reports of another’s behavior using the CTS. (Lee, S. J., Lansford, J. E., Pettit, G. S., Bates, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2012). Parental agreement of reporting parent to child aggression using the Conflict Tactics Scales. Child Abuse & Neglect, 36(6), 510-518. Available for purchase at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213412000993)

META-ANALYSES & RESEARCH SYNTHESSES

FINDINGS IN META-ANALYSES & RESEARCH SYNTHESSES


**BOTTOM LINE:** Researchers found that parenting was significantly impacted by mothers’ experiences of childhood maltreatment, with interesting distinctions between maltreatment types in childhood and effects on parenting as measured by self-report or observation. There was no relationship between self-reported parenting competencies and observed parenting behaviors in this study.

**SUMMARY:** Researchers found that parenting was significantly impacted by mothers’ experiences of childhood maltreatment, with different types of maltreatment predicting different outcomes. The History of Maltreatment and Trauma Form, a newer tool validated in this study, revealed interesting distinctions between maltreatment types in childhood and effects on parenting as measured by self-report or observation. The 93 Canadian mothers participating in this study endorsed at least one of three risk factors (adolescent mother, single mother, low income). Mothers who had experienced neglect and emotional maltreatment or witnessed family violence as children showed greater hostility than other mothers in observed interactions with their 4- to 6-year-old children. A history of physical or sexual abuse did not affect observed emotional availability or hostility. However, a history of sexual abuse was associated with self-reported lack of parenting competence. There was no relationship between self-reported parenting competencies and observed parenting behaviors in this study.

**ABSTRACT:** *Objective:* Childhood maltreatment is associated with subsequent parenting difficulties; however, most research has relied on self-reported parenting outcomes, and observational measures have revealed mixed findings. Furthermore, research has focused predominantly on histories of sexual and/or physical abuse. This study explored associations between a wide range of childhood maltreatment experiences and both observed and self-reported parenting outcomes.

*Methods:* Mothers of 4- to 6-year-old children at moderate social risk completed the History of Maltreatment and Trauma Form (HMTF), which assesses a range of maltreatment experiences and delineates specific characteristics such as chronicity and severity. Participants completed questionnaires assessing parenting stress and competence, and their emotional availability (sensitivity, intrusiveness, hostility) toward their children was coded from videorecorded interactions.

*Results:* Construct (factorial, convergent and discriminant) validity of the HMTF was demonstrated through factor analysis and a multi-trait, multi-method matrix comparing it to the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. HMTF-assessed childhood maltreatment, specifically witnessing family violence, neglect and emotional maltreatment, were significantly associated with mothers’ observed hostility toward their children, even after controlling for potentially traumatic adult experiences. In contrast, childhood sexual abuse history was associated with self-reported concerns regarding parenting competence, and this association held even after controlling for other forms of childhood.
maltreatment and potentially traumatic adult experiences. Self-reported parenting outcomes were unrelated to observed parenting behavior.

**Conclusions:** Findings highlight the complexity of associations between child maltreatment and subsequent parenting outcomes. Although much previous research has focused on sexual and physical abuse, other more contextual forms of maltreatment may be similarly or more strongly associated with certain parenting outcomes. Furthermore, different forms of maltreatment may be associated with perceived versus observed parenting outcomes.


**BOTTOM LINE:** Among a sample of 92 adolescent mothers (under 17 years old at child’s birth) participating in a statewide home visiting program in Massachusetts, mothers who had experienced physical abuse in their childhood were four times as likely to neglect their own children as were young mothers who were not abused. Mothers who experienced positive care in childhood were less likely to neglect their children, even among those who also experienced physical abuse.

**SUMMARY:** Among a sample of 92 adolescent mothers (under 17 years old at child’s birth) participating in a statewide home visiting program in Massachusetts, mothers who had experienced physical abuse in their childhood were four times as likely to neglect their own children as were young mothers who were not abused. Mothers who experienced positive care in childhood were less likely to neglect their children, even if they had also experienced physical abuse. In this study of the etiology of child neglect, close to half (45%) of the mothers had been physically abused and more than a quarter (26%) of them were substantiated perpetrators of neglect in the first 6-9 years of their children’s lives. Neglectful mothers included 44% of those who had experienced abuse and just 9% of those who had not. More than three-quarters (78%) of these young mothers reported positive care in childhood; mothers who did not receive positive care were more likely to neglect their children (58%) than those who received positive care (15%). More than a quarter (27%) of mothers reported childhood experiences of both physical abuse and positive care; the majority (77%) of these mothers were not neglectful. (The researchers did not find a hypothesized mediation effect where receiving positive care would have made neglect less likely among those who experienced abuse – but it is not clear whether this was due to small sample size or other factors.) This study highlights two important risk factors for child neglect – young maternal age and maternal history of physical abuse – while making a welcome contribution to our understanding of neglect and the nuanced effect of childhood experiences on subsequent parenting.

**ABSTRACT:** Children born to the youngest mothers are at substantial risk for neglect. Neglect is multiply determined, but a maternal childhood history of maltreatment is an especially influential parenting determinant. This study investigated the etiology of neglect among very young mothers (< 17 years; n = 92), focusing on adolescents’ experiences in childhood. We hypothesized that a history of childhood physical abuse would increase the odds of neglect, whereas a history of childhood positive care would decrease the odds of neglect. Results showed that one in four mothers was neglectful, and neglect was four times as likely with a maternal history of physical abuse in childhood.
than with no history of maltreatment. As expected, a maternal history of positive care in childhood decreased the likelihood of neglect. Mothers with a history of both childhood physical abuse and positive care were not at increased risk for neglect, suggesting a compensatory effect of care experiences within the context of an abusive relationship. Findings affirm that adolescent mothers are at considerable risk for perpetuating cycles of maltreatment leading to child neglect, and that nuanced descriptions of their childhood histories are essential for understanding cycles of maltreatment.

**ADDITIONAL FINDINGS IN CONSEQUENCES OF MALTREATMENT**

Participants in the Chicago Longitudinal Study who experienced child maltreatment between ages 0 and 11 were statistically more likely to commit violent crimes in adolescence and adulthood than their non-maltreated peers. Among males, environmental instability in late childhood and early adolescence, externalizing behaviors in childhood, and social skills in adolescence were found to mediate the relationship between child maltreatment to violent offending. Among females, externalizing behaviors in adolescence partly mediated the relationship, while internalizing behaviors in adolescence appeared to be protective against violent offending. (Topitzes, J., Mersky, J. P. & Reynolds, A. J. (2012). *From child maltreatment to violent offending*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 27*(12), 2322-2347. Available for purchase at [http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/27/12/2322.abstract](http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/27/12/2322.abstract))

**RECENT RESOURCES IN THE FIELD**

Be sure to check out these prevention-related resources released by other organizations in recent months. If your organization has released a research-based resource related to child abuse and neglect prevention that you’d like to see included in the next Research Review, please email researchreview@ctfalliance.org.

  Includes tips for parents, early education and child care providers, and pediatricians to promote social-emotional health among young children.


- PFS Database 2.0.
- A revised manual for administering the Protective Factors Survey.


- Defines and describes key concepts in social sciences research from a public health perspective.


The Research Savvy Practitioner

This regular feature of the Research Review discusses issues related to accessing, understanding, and applying research in your work in child abuse and neglect prevention.

This issue of the Research Review includes a new category of prevention research article summaries. The new category, “Making the Case for Prevention: Consequences of Maltreatment,” will be used to highlight recent research findings about the lifelong effects of child maltreatment and other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Some of these articles overlap with the category of “Risk and Protective Factors for Child Maltreatment” – particularly those that measure the effect of early experiences on parenting. Those studies will continue to be of particular interest. But with the addition of this new category, we will also highlight studies about the relationship of ACEs to an increasingly wide range other outcomes in adulthood.

Why should prevention practitioners be concerned about studies demonstrating the impact of abuse and neglect? Many of us may feel that these findings simply confirm what we have known all along: that child maltreatment has terrible consequences for children, families, and communities. Some in the prevention community may be concerned that an emphasis on ACEs will lead to greater investments in intervention rather than prevention. However, these studies are worth paying attention to, for the following reasons:

The lack of a registry listing does not mean that a program is not effective. Many programs have simply not been subjected to the type of rigorous evaluation necessary to prove their effectiveness. Even for those that have been evaluated, it can take several years for a program to accumulate enough evidence to meet the criteria for inclusion on a program registry. Evaluations must be completed – often with lengthy follow-up periods, data must be analyzed, and results must be published in academic journals.

✍️ The media and the public have begun to pay attention to ACEs and their consequences. Child maltreatment prevention professionals should be prepared to address this topic, make the most of the increased attention to the field, and turn the conversation toward prevention whenever possible.

✍️ Knowledge of ACEs and their consequences has the power to bring new partners to child maltreatment prevention – from public health, health care, corrections, business, and other fields. The latest findings might point in the direction of another stakeholder who has not yet been engaged in this work.

✍️ Studies about the impact of ACEs on physical health and other adult outcomes may sway those who otherwise believe that children “bounce back” easily or don’t remember early experiences. Outcomes data can be used to make a compelling case for the importance of early experiences and the potential impact of effective prevention efforts.

✍️ Findings about the effects of childhood experiences often point the way toward prevention of ACEs in subsequent generations. Understanding how childhood experiences can affect parenting behaviors, we can better address the needs of parents who had those experiences and want to give their children a better start.

✍️ For example, following initial promising findings by the program developer, Family Connections, a home-based program to prevent child neglect, has been
In This Issue

Spotlight on Parenting Education and Support: Research and Practice

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON PARENTING EDUCATION AND SUPPORT

Over the past decade a number of meta-analyses have been published related to parenting education programs. A meta-analysis is a research study that combines data from a number of previous studies by different authors. Sometimes a meta-analysis is a re-analysis of data combined from several sources, but more often meta-analysis is the synthesis of results from other studies – comparing, contrasting, and combining the results, but not actually combining and re-analyzing the data. In either case, by looking across many studies, researchers can see trends and draw

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a meta-analysis of parent training programs which was published in 2008. They analyzed effects on parenting measures and children’s externalizing behaviors in 128 published evaluations of programs for parents of children ages 0-7, and analyzed which program characteristics were associated with greater and smaller effects. Greater effects were found in programs that promoted positive parent-child interaction and emotional communication skills, taught parents the importance of consistency and how to use time-out, and required parents to practice their new skills with their children during program sessions. Smaller effect sizes were found among programs that taught parents problem-solving skills, focused on promoting children’s cognitive, academic, or social skills, and provided additional services outside of the program sessions.

Two meta-analyses conducted by Lundahl and colleagues at the University of Utah in the past six years have also drawn conclusions about program characteristics that are associated with increased effectiveness. One meta-analysis found that across 23 studies, parent training programs were more effective at reducing both risk for child abuse and actual abuse when they included home visitors and were offered in a combination of home and office settings and group and individual settings, as opposed to group-only. Inclusion of a behavioral component was also associated with better outcomes. The second meta-analysis focused on father involvement in parent training and found that fathers got less out of participation in these programs than mothers did. However, inclusion of fathers was associated with greater effects on parenting practices and children’s behaviors. Programs that included fathers did not differ from other programs in their effects on parenting attitudes.

Other studies focusing on specific aspects of parenting education and support programs can also provide meaningful information. For example, a recent study explored issues with recruiting and retaining parents to participate in a program, using one program as a case study.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the research to date tells us that parenting education and support programs can be effective and gives some guidance about what makes them more likely to achieve the intended results, questions persist. There is still room for improvement in targeting of programs, what is taught to parents and how it is taught.

Several of the issues to be resolved in the coming years relate to better matching of audience and intervention. We know that some combination of parenting education and support will help to improve outcomes for most families, but the nuances are


Several of the issues to be resolved in the coming years relate to better matching of audience and intervention. We know that some combination of parenting education and support will help to improve outcomes for most families, but the nuances are too often lost in a one-size-fits-all approach. The push to use evidence-based programs is one factor in the use of inappropriate programs for a specific audience—because there is not an evidence-based program for every audience and every need. This is of particular concern in cases where proven preventive programs are being used to intervene with systems-involved families who would likely benefit more from different content or delivery methods than the universal, lower-risk audience for whom many programs were designed. As Lisbeth Schorr articulated in Within Our Reach, it may actually be detrimental to offer parenting education and support rather than targeted services to families struggling with serious issues, whether material hardship, mental illness, substance abuse, or ingrained patterns of abusive or neglectful parenting.6

Another area for future growth is in looking more closely at what is taught in these programs and whether it is the best parenting advice we can give. For example, most evidence-based parenting education programs are grounded in a behavioralist approach, teaching parents strategies to manage their children’s behavior such as time-out. An emphasis on time-out in parenting education programs can lead to over-reliance on time-out within families, to the detriment of more empathetic ways of shaping children’s behavior. While authors such as Alfie Kohn publish books and give lectures to argue for alternative approaches to child-rearing, it appears that these approaches are only rarely addressed in parenting education and support programs.7

STATE SPOTLIGHT: COLORADO

From year to year, the Colorado Children’s Trust Fund (CCTF) supports a network of approximately 20 local community-based partners implementing the Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) for Parents and their Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers around the state.

The CCTF began funding implementation of NPP in 2005. The state legislature had raided CTF’s funds to balance the budget in 2003, forcing a hiatus in grant-making for fiscal year 2003-04. Prior to the funding crisis, grantees had implemented programs of their choice and were not required to show effectiveness. Colorado Children’s Trust Fund director Scott Bates and his staff wanted to show that the CCTF was making a difference for families in the state, and used the funding freeze to explore options for proven, affordable prevention programs. Now, using an evidence-based program with a built-in evaluation component (the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory, or AAPI, which is administered before and after NPP each time it is offered), the CCTF has accrued data over five years demonstrating that parents who participate in at least 12 sessions experience significant changes in their attitudes toward parenting.

The program is generally offered as a universal-access program of 16, two-hour, group-based sessions. Parents may also participate in individual sessions with the

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facilitator as needed. Bates says that grantees have found some parents are initially reluctant to commit to a 16-week program, but then don’t want it to end. (Some grantees allow parents to re-enroll, considering it an investment in developing parent leaders.) One benefit of using NPP is that a number of variations of the program are available – and have been tested for effectiveness. Some grantees have used the Spanish-language version of the program; another grantee offers NPP for teen mothers at an alternative high school and splits it into 32 one-hour sessions to fit in the school schedule.

The CCTF encourages all of its community-based partners to reach out to families involved with social services, but grantees’ success in engaging such families in NPP has been mixed. The quality of the relationship between the community-based partner and the local social services agency has played a large role in the success or failure of those outreach efforts. When higher-risk parents have participated in NPP, facilitators have been able to nurture the friendships and mentoring relationships that develop over the course of the 16 sessions, further supporting those higher-risk families in building protective factors.

While there were some challenges encountered with some grantees when the CCTF made the switch to NPP, the majority of grantees stayed involved, took advantage of the training and technical assistance offered by the CCTF, and are now implementing NPP. Bates explains that in addition to high-quality, research-based content, NPP provides a structure within which experienced parenting educators can use their “soft skills” – connecting with parents, engaging them in the program, and ensuring that they get as much as possible out of it.

Pleased with this initial success using an evidence-based program, the CCTF is now working to expand the effort. This year they are supporting implementation of the Incredible Years and Parents as Teachers in addition to NPP.