



The Benefits of Parenting Education

*A Literature Review for Wilder's
Child Development Center*

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Introduction

In April of 2016, the Wilder Child Development Center requested that Wilder Research conduct a literature review of parent education programs in order to identify specific benefits of these programs to parents, children, and the parent-child relationship. Additionally, best practices that supported the aforementioned benefits were identified with the intention of understanding how current parent education programming offered by the Child Development Center aligns with these best practices.

The primary benefits identified through the literature were as follows: increases in positive parenting practices; parental empowerment; improvements in child behavior; improved parent-child interactions; decreases in parents' use of corporal punishment and the risk of child abuse; increased social connection for parents; and improved parental mental health.

The best practices identified were: actively engaging parents, reaching parents early, making cultural adaptations to parenting programs, offering frequent sessions over several months, promoting family routines, and using skilled parent educators.

Search process

An initial search for literature on parent education published in academic and peer-reviewed journals was completed by Wilder Research library staff. The literature was then reviewed for articles focused on positive parenting, benefits to children, benefits to parents, benefits to the parent-child relationship, and best practices.

Scope

Initially, the search focused on benefits to children, parents, the parent-child relationship and best practices within the realm of parenting education. An expanded definition of "best practices" was needed in order to find relevant information. The terms that were decided to indicate a best practice were improved "parental efficacy" or "confidence," and "evidence-based." We identified parent education strategies as a "best practice" if the available research identified statistically significant improvements to parents or children participating in a parent education program.

Benefits of parent education

The following summarizes the key benefits of parent education that emerged from the literature review conducted by Wilder Research. The review highlights benefits to the parent and their parenting, the child, and the parent-child relationship. The benefits identified are those that were most prevalent in the broad scope of literature reviewed, but may not be exhaustive.

Increase in positive parenting practices

One of the most common benefits that emerged from the studies reviewed was the acquisition of positive parenting practices by parents. Eight sources referenced in this literature review cite “positive parenting” specifically as central to the goals of the program (de Graaf, Speetjens, Smit, de Wolff, & Tavecchio, 2008; Devall, 2004; Saunders, McFarland-Piazza, Jacobvitz, Swann, & Burton, 2013; Homem, Gaspar, Santos, Azevedo, & Canavarro, 2015; Katz, Lederman, & Osofsky, 2011; Menting, de Castro, & Matthys, 2013; Ponzetti, 2015; Wilson, Hahn, Gonzales, Henry, & Cerbana, 2011). Seven out of the eight evidence-based programs reviewed specifically identified positive parenting practices like using positive language, planned discipline, and family routines as central to the success of parents in their program (de Graaf et al., 2008; Devall, 2004; Menting et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2011; Ponzetti, 2015).

Several articles described how parents’ use of positive language (also frequently referred to as “positive guidance”) is a tool that can be used to increase desired behaviors in children (Katz et al., 2011). According to Gartrell (as cited in Saunders et al., 2013, p. 323):

Positive guidance...involves using language that is clear, direct, and culturally and developmentally appropriate. An adult and child engaged in conversation may have different ideas about what a particular term means if it is imprecise. Clear use of language includes substituting negative language with positive language, for example, telling children what to do instead of what not to do, such as saying “Please walk” instead of “No running.” Avoidance of negative language, such as ‘no’, ‘stop’, and ‘don’t’, is important because children who are told only to stop their behavior do not hear possibilities for alternatives (Gartrell, 1994).

Evidence-based programs focused on positive parenting tended to promote practices or skills such as: encouraging nurturing behaviors (Devall, 2004; Ponzetti, 2015), increasing knowledge of child development (Samuelson, 2010), building self-esteem in parents and children (Katz et al., 2011), increasing knowledge of communication styles and differences (Wilson et al., 2011), and incorporating interactive, positive family experiences into program routines (Ponzetti, 2015).

Many articles also cited the importance of using more positive discipline strategies, such as: setting clear limits (Ponzetti, 2015; Saunders et al., 2013); planning discipline in advance and communicating about expectations (Wilson et al., 2011; Ponzetti, 2015); using calm, clear instructions (de Graaf et al., 2008); and increasing parents' ability to problem solve with their children (Homem et al., 2015; Ponzetti, 2015; Saunders et al., 2013). Saunders et al. (2013) note that positive guidance "avoids punitive responses and the use of negative or controlling language" (p. 323).

Parental empowerment

In recent years, organizations have become more aware of the importance of an individual's sense of agency in achieving success. Wright and Wooden (2013) note that "the specialized training that professionals receive provides them with knowledge that can place them in the role of expert within the change process" (p. 168), which can result in an unbalanced power dynamic, putting parents in an inferior position in which some are left feeling incapable of creating change.

Several studies reviewed identified programs that aim to improve parents' sense of self-efficacy and competency. Triple P Positive Parenting is a multilevel program that has a large emphasis on building parents' capacity for self-regulation. Through observation, discussion, practice and feedback, parents learn causes of children's behavior and specific strategies for managing misbehavior and encouraging children's development. The meta-analysis of Triple P conducted by de Graaf et al. (2008) found significant, positive effects on parental satisfaction with their parenting role and feelings of efficacy as a parent directly following the Triple P Level 4 intervention.

Some programs increased parents' sense of efficacy by involving parents in staff roles within the program. In the parent-developed, parent-run program, Helping Our Parents to be Educators (HOPE), a small group of parents were recruited to create a curriculum on parenting, help with recruitment of students, and facilitate group sessions. Once the program had a number of graduates, those who had completed the program were recruited to join the group of parent educators and continue the cycle. According to Wright and Wooden (2013), there were statistically significant increases in these parents' empowerment attitudes and behaviors relative to a control group.

Other programs noted an increase in self-efficacy as a result of achieving other successful program goals. For example, findings from an evaluation of the Parenting from Prison (PFP) curriculum revealed a substantial increase in the level of communication between parents and children, while at the same time parents also experienced significant increases in their self-esteem and feelings of self-mastery (Wilson, Gonzalez, Romero, Henry, & Cerbana, 2010). A key component of the PFP curriculum, BrainWise, outlines coping skills for emotionally stressful real-life situations.

Improvements in child behavior

Many articles noted an improvement in child behavior as the result of parent education (Homem et al., 2015; Lindsay, Strand, & Davis, 2011; Menting et al., 2013; McGilloway et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, 2009 ; Ponzetti, 2015). In this literature review, “improvements in child behavior” include increases in children’s prosocial behavior and decreases in negative externalizing behaviors.

A meta-analysis conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found four key components of programs that significantly reduced children’s externalizing behaviors: teaching parents the correct use of time out; teaching parents to respond consistently to their child; teaching parents to interact positively with their child; and requiring parents to practice with their child during program sessions (2009).

The Incredible Years (IY) program in particular was found to significantly improve child behavior (Homem et al., 2015; Lindsay, Strand, & Davis, 2011; Menting, de Castro, & Matthys, 2013; McGilloway et al., 2014). In the meta-analytic review of the Incredible Years program conducted by Menting et al. (2013), 33 out of the 39 studies found positive effects for disruptive behavior as a result of IY parent training, and 22 out of the 39 studies in the meta-analysis showed an increase in prosocial behavior. In a randomized control trial of the IY Basic parent-training program, McGilloway et al. found that not only did the IY program improve child behavior, but that the improvements were maintained at 6 month and 12 month follow ups. The study also found a significant reduction in problem sibling behavior, particularly over the longer period between the two follow-up periods.

Improved parent-child interactions

Many studies noted an improvement in the parent-child relationship as a result of parent education (Homem et al., 2015; Kennet & Chislett, 2012; Ponzetti, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011; Wright & Wooden, 2013). Studies which assessed the parent-child relationship tended to highlight enhanced communication skills and understanding between family members. However, detailed information regarding the exact nature of what was meant by “improvement in parent-child interactions” was not often available.

One of these programs with this particular focus is the Nurturing Parenting Program, an evidence-based parent education program that has a strong focus on improving the parent-child relationship in addition to seeking improvement in the parents’ own relationship with themselves (Ponzetti, 2015). Devall (2004) found that in a study of the implementation of the Nurturing Parenting Program (which took place in a variety of settings including federal prisons), “parents showed significant improvements in their empathy for children’s needs and knowledge of positive discipline techniques.”

Decrease in corporal punishment and risk of child abuse

For programs serving multi-stressed families, a positive outcome of parent education can be a decrease in the risk of child abuse or a decrease in the use of harsh, physical punishment. For example, parents completing the aforementioned Nurturing Parenting Program, “continuously show significant positive pre-posttest gains in [positive] parenting beliefs” (p. 220), as measured by the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI), a tool that indicates the risk of child abuse and neglect based on known parenting and childrearing behaviors of abusive parents (Ponzetti, 2015). The Nurturing Parenting Program teaches six values that foster this change in mindset: appropriate expectations; building empathy in children and parents; alternatives to physical punishment; appropriate family roles; developing empowerment and independence in children and adults; and humor, laughter and fun (Ponzetti, 2015).

In the Supporting Father Involvement Project which also has a focus on relationships (mainly on the co-parenting relationship), “mothers reported a decline in violent problem-solving strategies used by the couple,” and used “less harsh physical punishment of the children and saw the children as less aggressive overall” (Ponzetti, 2015, p. 184).

Increased social connection

Many studies noted an increased sense of social connection among parents as a result of parent education (Bess & Doykos 2014; Kennet & Chislett, 2012; Homem et al., 2015; Ponzetti, 2015; Wright & Wooden, 2013).

One program, Tied Together, relied on the strength of a “place-based” approach in which all parents recruited for the program came from the local community. The aim was to create a social network that would support participants as individuals and as parents. Based upon interviews conducted with parents at the end of the study, Ceballo and McLoyd (2002; as cited in Bess & Doykos, 2014) found that, “graduates mainly described examples of exchanging parenting advice or information and providing emotional support to each other... some described occasions in which they provided assistance and material support, such as helping each other out with their kids or passing along baby clothes” (p. 275).

Similarly, the HOPE program found a significant increase in parents’ perceived social support (Wright & Wooden, 2013). Mentioned above, the HOPE program facilitated the formation of a close-knit community as parents were given a large role in developing, delivering and recruiting participants.

According to Ceballo and McLoyd (2002; as cited in Bess & Doykos, 2014) “several decades of research suggest that when parents experience positive social support...they

are more likely to engage in positive parenting practices” (p. 270). Specifically, parents who have a strong sense of social connection are more likely to display parental warmth and nurturing (Ceballo & McLoyd, as cited in Bess & Doykos, 2014), have more positive feelings about parenting (Crnic & Greenberg, as cited in Bess & Doykos, 2014), and demonstrate improved mental health outcomes (Wandersman & Nation, as cited in Bess & Doykos, 2014).

Improvement in parent mental health

Two meta-analyses found that certain parent education programs can also have a positive effect on parents’ mental health (Barlow, Smailagic, Huband, Roloff & Bennett, 2014; Furlong et al., 2012).

In a meta-analysis of 13 studies of group-based parenting programs aimed at children ages 3-12 with early onset conduct problems, Furlong et al. (2012) found that parent training, grounded in behavioral and cognitive-behavioral theories, led to a statistically significant improvement in parents’ mental health.

In their review of 48 studies focused on programs grounded in behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, and multi-modal strategies, Barlow et al. (2014) found that parents’ depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, anger, and guilt decreased significantly in the short-term following participation in these programs. However, a decrease in parents’ level of stress and an increase in parents’ sense of confidence were the only long-term, statistically significant effects observed at a six month follow-up and none were significant at one year. More research is needed in order to determine how programs could best support parents in maintaining these results.

In both analyses, group-based parent education programs were the only types of parenting education that were reviewed. Therefore, it is not known whether or not individualized parent education would produce similar results.

In a study conducted by Lindsay, Strand, and Davis (2011) that assessed the Incredible Years (IY), Triple P, and Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC) programs, parents in the IY and Triple P programs experienced an increase in their mental well-being scores as measured by the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) from well below the national average to at or above the average score.

In addition to enhanced mental health and well-being, several articles found that parents involved in parent education programs experienced improvements in some skills related to executive functioning such as establishing appropriate expectations of childrens’

developmental stages (Ponzetti, 2015) and self-regulation/emotional regulation (de Graaf et al., 2008; Li, Chan, Lam, & Mak, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011).

These benefits are generally observed in programs that have a “cognitive emphasis” such as the evidence-based program, Parenting Wisely (Ponzetti, 2015). The Parenting Wisely program is an online parent training program that has incorporated mindfulness, active listening, I-messages, problem solving and speaking respectfully into its curriculum. Mindfulness in particular “has been shown to improve emotional self-control and decrease anxiety, anger and depression.” (p. 162).

Best practices

The literature review also included a review of “best practices” in the area of parent education, which in this context refer to program elements that lead to beneficial outcomes for parents and children. In order to determine which of the dozens of program elements qualify as a “best practice,” we looked at those practices that were supported by a research-base and determined to be “evidence-based” practices. This included strategies or practices that research found to be associated with positive outcomes in a statistically significant way. The following identifies some of the common best practices that emerged from the literature review.

Actively engage parents

Most successful programs noted various opportunities for a parent to practice the skills they were learning, whether that was with a parent education professional, at home, on-site with their own child, or in a group setting (Kennett & Chislett, 2012; Ponzetti, 2015; Saunders et al., 2013).

Reach parents early

The earlier children can be reached, the more likely it is that problems will be addressed right away, which can set the stage for positive experiences later in life (Samuelson, 2010). Prenatal and postnatal education programs for new parents appear to improve a range of outcomes including parenting skills, children’s development, and parents’ and childrens’ mental health (Pinquart & Teubert, 2010).

Make cultural adaptations

According to Saunders (2013), “effective programs recognize the special needs and cultural traditions of the families they serve and match materials and programs to the different needs of particular audiences” (p. 5). Additionally, all seven of the evidence-based programs described by Ponzetti describe cultural adaptation of the program as essential to the programs’ success within various cities, countries and communities (Ponzetti, 2015).

Offer frequent sessions over several months

Research has found that, in general, programs with a longer duration tend to be more effective than shorter programs (Cochrane-Barlow, 2010; Pinquart, 2010). However, studies also indicate that a program's effectiveness may actually decrease if the program continues for more than 6 months (Pinquart 2010), suggesting that especially lengthy programs may not be beneficial; further research is needed, however, to determine the long-term effects of programming on a program's effectiveness (What Works for Health, 2016). Six of the evidence-based programs reviewed involved engaging with parents on a weekly basis at minimum (Katz et al., 2011; Kennet & Chislett, 2012; Menting et al., 2013; Ponzetti, 2015), suggesting that programs have the most impact when they are of sufficient duration and sessions are offered relatively frequently.

Promote family routines

Several studies cited the importance of appropriate family roles, regular family routines, and family activities to positive parenting (Devall, 2004; Katz et al., 2011; Ponzetti, 2015). Ponzetti (2015) in particular noted four separate, evidence-based programs that included an emphasis on family routines.

Use skilled parent educators

Parents appear to benefit the most from programs taught by trained, professional educators. A meta-analysis conducted on relationship-based interventions by Mortenson and Mastergeorge (2014) reviewed 18 articles on 19 interventions and found that professional intervenors were more effective at facilitating supportive parent-child interactions than were paraprofessionals. Samuelson notes similar findings, adding, "research shows that professionals from many fields including social work and nursing have taught parent education with success" (2010).

It should be noted that some of these practices may work better for some types of parents than others. For example, some literature has found that group parenting programs are not as effective with economically disadvantaged families as individual interventions (What Works for Health, 2016).

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