

Increasing the Nurturing Parenting Skills of Families in Head Start:

Validation of the Nurturing Program for Parents and Children Birth to Five Years

By

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Abstract

In the fall of 1984 and spring of 1985, Families enrolled in Head Start programs in a seven-county area in Wisconsin participated in an innovative program designed to increase their parenting and nurturing capabilities and reduce the risk for child maltreatment. The Nurturing Parenting Program for Parents and Children Birth to Five Years was implemented by Head Start staff for both parents and their children birth to five years of age enrolled in home-based and center-based programs. Pretest and posttest data were gathered to assess the effectiveness of the program to increase the nurturing capabilities of both parents and children. Data generated from the pre and posttesting indicate:

1. A total of 260 adults were pretested in home-based and center-based programs. Sixty-six percent (N = 171) participated in the posttest assessment.
2. Parents demonstrated a significant increase ($p < .05$) in their ability to be empathically aware of their children's needs.
3. Parents expressed a significant decrease ($p < .05$) in their beliefs regarding the value of corporal punishment as a means of punishing behavior, and in reversing parent-child role responsibilities.
4. Parents showed a significant increase ($p < .05$) regarding appropriate expectations they have toward the capabilities of their children.
5. Test results further indicate parents made significant increases ($p < .05$) in their knowledge of appropriate alternatives to corporal punishment.
6. On a four-point scale (4 = Strongly Agree), parents expressed favorable ($X = 3.3$) perceptions about the program's positive impact on their role as parents, and favorable ($X = 3.1$) perceptions about the program's positive impact on their children's social, emotional, and cognitive growth and development.
7. An overwhelming number of parents (97%) indicated they would recommend participation in the Nurturing Parenting Program to other parents.

Introduction

In the fall of 1984 and spring of 1985, Families enrolled in Head Start programs in a seven-county area in Wisconsin participated in an innovative program designed to increase their parenting and nurturing capabilities and reduce the risk for child maltreatment. The Nurturing Parenting Program for Parents and Children Birth to Five Years was implemented by Head Start staff for both parents and their children birth to five years of age enrolled in home-based and center-based programs. The Nurturing Parenting Program, implemented with Head Start families, was developed from the initial work of Bavolek, Comstock, and McLaughlin (1983) in developing the Nurturing Program for Parents and Children 4 to 12 Years.

Pretest and posttest data were gathered to assess the effectiveness of the program to increase the nurturing capabilities of both parents and their children enrolled in Head Start.

Methodology

The Nurturing Parenting Program for Parents and Children Birth to Five Years consists of 45 individual sessions. The curriculum is sequential; each session relies upon the previous session as a prerequisite for learning new skills. The program consists of separate curriculum for the parents and for the children. The content of the program focuses on increasing the self-esteem and self-concept of the parents while teaching nurturing parenting skills appropriate for children birth to five years.

Home-Based Program

Home-based instruction occurred on a weekly basis, each session running approximately 1 ½ hours. During each home visit, the first forty-five minutes was spent with the entire family and the home visitor working together. Parents were encouraged to take the role of the primary teacher with the home visitor serving as a support.

The remaining 45 minutes of the home visit was the time the home visitor and parents worked together. The primary focus was on the adults, either in their role as parents, or on issues related to self. The outline, described earlier for the parents, was routinely followed. During the time the parents worked with the home visitor, the older children were usually involved in other independent play activities. Infants and toddlers generally remained with the parents.

Center-Based Program

Center-based instruction also occurred on a weekly basis. Parents and their children birth to five years would attend separate group sessions meeting concurrently. Both groups would come together for a meal, either breakfast or lunch. The goal of the joint meal time was not only to physically feed and nourish the parents and children, but also to build family cohesion and nurturing interactions through play and food. One Head Start staff member would facilitate the parent group, and depending upon the ages and number of children participating in the children's program, two or three would be needed to facilitate the children's program.

Date Collection

Evaluation of the program's impact on promoting the development of nurturing parent-child interactions occurred during three stages of program operation. The first point of data collection occurred when the families entered the program in August. At this time, all pretest and posttest data were collected. The second phase of data collection occurred throughout the nine months the program was in operation. Parents and staff were asked to respond to weekly process evaluation questionnaire designed to monitor program functioning, participation of families, and perceived effectiveness of the curricula. The third phase of data collection occurred in May at the close of the program. Families were then asked to complete posttest measures. Upon entering the program in August, parents were administered the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) and the Nurturing Quiz. The AAPI is a valid and reliable inventory designed to assess the parenting and child rearing attitudes of parents and adolescents (Bavolek, Kline, & McLaughlin, 1979). Developed from the four known parenting behaviors of abusive parents: inappropriate parental expectations, lack of empathy, strong belief in corporal punishment, and parent-child role reversal, the 32-item inventory has been normed on over 2,500 abusive and non-abusive parents, and over 8,500 abused and non-abused adolescents. Using a five-point Likert range of responses (Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), respondents indicate their degree of approval or disapproval to specific parenting and child rearing practices. Levels of risk for abuse are calculated based on approval of parenting practices known to promote physical and emotional abuse (Bavolek, et. al., 1979).

The Nurturing Quiz is a 25-item, multiple choice informal measure designed to assess a parent's knowledge of specific behavior management techniques. Questions include awareness and use of such strategies as time-out, ignoring, the difference between discipline and punishment, the development of family rules, etc.

Throughout the year, parents and staff were asked to complete a process evaluation questionnaire at the end of each center-based or home-based weekly session. The Questionnaire was designed to elicit parents' attitudes regarding the worth of the specific session, the combined worth of all sessions to date, and recommendations for program improvement.

Outcome evaluation data are gathered at the close of the program in May. Parents were asked to complete Form B of the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) and the Nurturing Quiz. An exit questionnaire was mailed to all families one month later.

Results

The data presented in Table 1 lists the number of families who completed pretest inventories at the beginning of the program in August, and who completed posttest inventories at the completion of the program in May.

Table 1				
Completed Inventories				
	Began Program		Completed Program	
	N	%	N	%
Male	26	10	17	65
Female	234	90	154	66
TOTAL	260	100	171	66

The data presented in Table 1 indicates that 90% (N = 234) of the adults who enrolled in the seven Head Start programs in northwestern Wisconsin were females. Of this total, 154 or 66% completed posttest assessment inventories. The data also indicate that 65% of the males who enrolled in the Head Start programs in the fall of 1984 completed posttest inventories in the spring of 1985.

The reduced number of male and female adults participating in posttest assessment is due to a variety of factors. Reasons why families dropped out or were unable to receive the services of Head Start ranged from family relocation, to becoming income ineligible, to having another child during the year, to terminating their own involvement, to language barriers. Although families who dropped out were usually replaced with other eligible families, posttest data were gathered on only those families in the program during the entire year who completed pretests.

Data generated from the administration of the AAPI to adults is presented in Table 2. Column one lists each of the four assessed Constructs. Columns two and three list the mean (X) group scores per Construct. The data presented in Table 2 indicate the level of significant changes of assessed attitudes.

Table 2 AAPI Pre-Post Responses			
Construct	Pre X's	Post X's	Significance
A – Expectations	21.38	23.88	P<.05
B – Empathy	31.58	32.75	P<.05
C – Corporal Punishment	35.15	36.50	P<.05
D – Role Reversal	28.87	30.42	P<.05

A review of the data presented in Table 2 shows a significant increase in the parents' scores on all four areas of the AAPI. The scores indicate a significant shift in parents' attitudes reflecting the adoption of more positive, nurturing behaviors. Expectations of children were more age appropriate, parents increased their ability to be more empathically aware of the needs of their children, parents began substituting their belief of spanking children with the non-violent types of behavioral techniques, and a significant reduction occurred in reducing the likelihood of reversing parent-child family roles. Positive changes in parenting attitudes measured on the AAPI were significant ($p<.05$) in each of the four constructs.

Table 3 Nurturing Quiz Scores		
Pretest X's	Posttest X's	Significance
15.20	19.14	P<.05

The data presented in Table 3 reflects the parents' scores generated from the administering of the NurturingQuiz. The data presented in Table 3 indicates that parents significantly increased ($p<.05$) their knowledge of non-violent forms of behavior management.

The data presented in Table 4.1 are the parents' responses to the follow-up questionnaire sent to all families one month after completing the program. The questionnaire and accompanying letter were sent along with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

There are three sections to the questionnaire. Part One asks parents to rate themselves on a four-point scale on specific parenting issues and self-growth issues. Part Two directs parents' responses to perceptions of their children's growth and behavior. Part Three of the questionnaire addresses parents' overall reaction to the program, whether they would recommend the program to other parents, and whether they have shared their experiences of the program with other parents.

A review of Table 4.1 indicates a strong positive perception by the respondents of their parenting and nurturing skills. Ratings range from a low of 2.6 (I have decided not to spank my children anymore) to a high of 3.6 (I feel good about being a parent). Overall, the data show positive feelings about parents' ability to be nurturing.

Table 4.1 Part One - Parents	
Question	Rating
1. I know the developmental stages my child goes through as he/she grows up	3.3
2. I am aware of my child's needs.	3.4
3. I am able to understand how other people feel.	3.2
4. I am able to understand the reason other people behave the way they do.	3.0
5. I know ways to manage the behavior of my children without hitting them.	3.3
6. I have decided not to spank my children anymore.	2.6
7. I am aware of my own needs.	3.4
8. I know what to expect of myself when it comes to dealing with my children.	3.2
9. I have a sense of direction when it comes to getting along with my children.	3.3
10. I feel better about my children now than I did when I started the program.	3.2
11. Sometimes I do not like the way my children behave and it is okay for me to think like that.	3.4
12. I am confident when it comes to dealing with my children.	3.2
13. My children and I have a good relationship.	3.5
14. I feel good about being a parent.	3.6
15. I feel good most of the time about being an adult.	3.4
4 = Strongly Agree	
3 = Agree	
2 = Disagree	
1 = Strongly Agree	

The data presented in Table 4.2 also indicate very positive responses parents have for their children. Ratings range from a low 2.7 (My child is able to resolve his/her conflicts) to a high 3.6 (My child trusts me.) Overall, the ratings indicate very positive perceptions parents have of their children.

Table 4.2 Part Two - Children	
Question	Rating
1. My child is able to identify his/her needs.	3.1
2. My child is able to tell me about his/her needs.	3.1
3. My child is able to accept praise.	3.5
4. My child trusts me.	3.6
5. My child is confident.	3.2
6. My child recognizes that I have needs too.	2.9
7. My child knows ways for managing his/her own behavior.	2.9
8. My child is able to identify his/her strengths.	3.1
9. My child is able to resolve his/her conflicts.	2.7
4 = Strongly Agree	
3 = Agree	
2 = Disagree	
1 = Strongly Agree	

Table 4.3 provides parents an opportunity to respond to the overall value of their participation in the program. The data indicate parents felt the program was successful in helping them learn new parenting skills ($X = 3.4$) and in helping them become a healthier person ($X = 3.1$). Ninety-seven percent of the parents indicated they would recommend this program to other families, while 89% of the parents have already shared experiences of the program with other families.

Table 4.3
Part Three - Overall Reaction to the Training

Question	Rating	
1. Using the scale below, indicate the degree to which you feel the Nurturing Parenting Program was successful in helping you learn new parenting skills.	3.4	
2. Using the scale below, indicate the degree to which you feel the Nurturing Parenting Program was successful in helping you learn to be a healthier person.	3.1	
3. Would you recommend the Nurturing Parenting Program for other Head Start families	Yes 97%	No 3%
4. Have you shared your experiences in this program with any of your friends or relatives?	89%	11%
4 = Strongly Agree 3 = Agree 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree		

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from the data generated from the study:

1. Parents expressed significant awareness ($p < .05$) in parenting attitudes regarding appropriate child expectations and awareness of children's needs (empathy) as measured in posttest assessment.
2. Parents also expressed significant decreases ($p < .05$) in parenting attitudes regarding the use of corporal punishment and reversing parent-child roles as measured in posttest assessment.
3. Parents expressed significant ($p < .05$) increases in knowledge of appropriate behavior management techniques as measured in posttest assessment.
4. On a four-point Likert scale (4 = Strongly Agree), parents expressed favorable ($X = 3.3$) perceptions regarding the program's positive impact on their role as parents.
5. On the same scale, parents also expressed favorable ($X = 3.1$) perceptions about the program's positive impact on their children's social, emotions, and cognitive growth and development.
6. An overwhelming number of parents (97%) indicated they would recommend participation in the Nurturing Parenting Program to other parents.
7. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the parents indicated they have already shared experiences in this program with other friends and relatives.

Summary

The effectiveness of the Nurturing Parenting Program for Children Birth to Five Years to build positive parent-child interactions in families enrolling in home-based and center-based Head Start programs has been supported by the data generated from this project. Although this study does not represent a rigorous experimental research design with a control group and random assignment, etc, the study does indicate positive changes occurred. The Nurturing Parenting Program focuses jointly on building personal growth and growth as a nurturing parent, both of which are unique to the program. Unlike the education that was being provided by Head Start, changes in the parents can be attributed to their participation in the program. Parents' responses to the program indicated a strong attachment to the process of building healthier interaction patterns. As in previous research validating the Nurturing Parenting Program as an effective means of reducing the potential for child abuse and neglect, the single most expressed comment from the parents focused on the growth they felt as men and women. Building a positive self-concept and self-esteem, coupled with an increase in becoming more empathically aware of children's needs, is by far the most effective

intervention strategy designed to reduce the potential of child maltreatment. Once again, the research indicates that when parental empathy increases, violence towards children and family dysfunction decreases. Unlike other parent education programs whose focus is primarily teaching child development and behavior management to parents, the focus of the Nurturing Parenting Program is to work with the entire family in building more empathic parent-child interactions. It is through such an approach that education to build healthier families and reduce the potential for child maltreatment should be directed.

References

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