

# The Florida Study: A Comparative Examination of the Effectiveness of the Nurturing Parenting Programs®

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## Introduction

In the fall of 1999, the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) initiated a statewide study designed to assess the effectiveness of parenting programs offered to high risk and abusive/neglecting families referred for parent education. A secondary goal of the study was to compare the outcome data of parents attending Nurturing Parenting Programs® to families attending non-Nurturing Parenting Programs.

The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2) (Bavolek & Keene, 2002) was selected as the common inventory all agencies receiving state funding for parenting programs would administer to the parents they are serving. The AAPI-2 is a norm reference inventory designed to assess the parenting and child rearing attitudes of parent and non-parent adult and adolescent populations. Based on the known parenting and child rearing behaviors of abusive and neglecting parents, responses to the inventory provide an index of risk for practicing behaviors known to contribute to the maltreatment of children. The AAPI-2 is the revised and renormed version of the inventory developed by Bavolek (1984).

Responses to the AAPI-2 provide an index of risk in five specific parenting and child rearing areas:

### **Construct A: Parental Expectations**

A parenting practice that is very common among reported cases of child abuse and neglect is the inappropriate expectations parents have for their children. Beginning very early in the infant's life, abusive parents tend to inaccurately perceive the skills and abilities of their children. Inappropriate expectations of children are generally the result of three factors:

1. Parents simply don't know the needs and capabilities of children at various stages of growth and development. Ignorant of this knowledge, expectations are made that often exceed the skills and abilities of the child.
2. Many parents who abuse their children generally lack a positive view of themselves and consequently of their children. Inadequate perceptions of self as an adult generally stem from early childhood experiences of failure, ridicule, and disappointment. These patterns of childhood failure are repeated to yet another generation where demands are made for children to perform tasks that they are emotionally, physically, or intellectually incapable of performing.
3. Abusive parents generally lack the empathy that is required to determine what an appropriate expectation is for children at different stages of development. Lacking empathy, (described in more detail in the following construct), is a major contributor to the inappropriate demands parents make of their children.

The effects of inappropriate parental expectations upon children are debilitating. Many children perceive themselves as being worthless, as failures, and as unacceptable and disappointing to adults.

### **Construct B: Empathy Towards Children's Needs**

Empathy is the ability to be aware of another person's needs, feelings, and state of being. It is the ability to place the needs of another as a priority. Empathic parents are sensitive to their children and

create an environment that is conducive to promoting children's emotional, intellectual, physical, social, spiritual, and creative growth. Empathic parents understand their children from the inside, not from the outside as an interested observer.

Many professionals are of the opinion that the trait of empathy exists in children at birth and is fostered through the manner in which they are treated during the process of growing up. Parents lacking sufficient levels of empathy find children's needs and wants as irritating and overwhelming. Everyday normal demands are perceived as unrealistic resulting in increased levels of stress. The needs of the child come into direct conflict with the needs of the parent, which are often similar in magnitude.

Lacking an empathic home life, children often fail to develop a solid moral code of conduct. Right and wrong, cooperation, and kindness are not important because they are not recognized as important values. Others are devalued as "self" takes center stage. The impact of one's negative actions on another is muted, as the ability to care about the needs or feelings of another is not important. Children with low levels of empathy are often labeled as troublemakers, disobedient, and often engage in acts of cruelty to themselves, others, and animals.

### **Construct C: Use of Corporal Punishment as a Means of Discipline**

Physical punishment is generally the preferred means of discipline used by abusive parents. Throughout history, the use of corporal punishment has been well documented. Rationale for the practice includes:

1. To teach children right from wrong;
2. As a parenting practice sanctioned by the proverbs of the Old Testament;
3. As a cultural practice of discipline;
4. To provide punishment for children's misbehavior in a loving way;
5. Just simply to punish misbehavior; and
6. Because it produces quick results.

Abusive parents often believe children should not be "given into" or allowed to "get away with anything." They must periodically be shown "who is boss" and to respect authority so they will not become sassy or stubborn. Abusive parents not only consider physical punishment a proper disciplinary measure, but also strongly defend their right to use physical force.

Physical attacks by the abusing parent are not often a haphazard, uncontrolled, impulsive discharge of aggression by the parent toward his/her children. To the contrary, studies appear to indicate that abusive parents utilize physical punishment as a unit of behavior designed to punish and correct specific bad conduct or inadequacy on the part of children. Much of what abusive parents find wrong with their children are the same things for which they were criticized and punished for as children, hence the punishment carries the approval of traditional family authority and an aura of righteousness.

The effects of physical abuse are demonstrated in the observed inadequate behavior of children. It is a common tendency for abused children to identify with the aggressive parent in an effort to gain some measure of self-protection and mastery. Abused children often develop a set pattern of discharging aggression against the outside world in order to manage their own securities.

Additionally, children who see and experience recurrent serious expressions of violence in their own family learn that violence is a useful way to solve problems. These children, upon becoming parents,

tend to punish their children more severely. As a result, abused children often become abusive parents.

#### **Construct D: Parent-Child Role Responsibilities**

A fourth common parenting behavior among abusive parents is their need to reverse parent-child roles. Children are expected to be sensitive to and responsible for much of the happiness of their parents. Parent-child role reversal is an interchanging of traditional role behaviors between a parent and child, so that the child adopts some of the behaviors traditionally associated with parents. In role reversal, parents act like helpless, needy children looking to their own children for parental care and comfort.

Although the phenomenon of role reversal is often associated with an inability to be empathically aware of the children's needs, the two behaviors are markedly different. When abusive parents fail to show an empathic awareness of their children's needs, the children are often left to care for themselves. Carried to the extreme, children are emotionally and/or physically neglected or abused. The emphasis is not placed on children assuming the role of the "nurturing parent" as in role reversal. In the latter situation, children are an integral part of the family functions often becoming a source of authority, control, and decision-making.

The effects of role reversal on abused children are destructive. Assuming the role of the responsible parent, children fail to negotiate the developmental tasks that must be mastered at each stage of life if they are to achieve normal development and healthy adjustment. Failure to perform any of the developmental tasks not only hampers development in succeeding stages, but also further reinforces feelings of inadequacy. Children in a role reversal situation have little sense of self and see themselves as existing only to meet the needs of their parents.

#### **Construct E: Children's Power and Independence**

Closely aligned with the value of physical punishment and the lack of an empathic awareness of children's needs is the belief that children's independence and power need to be oppressed. The age-old phrase "the terrible twos" most adequately describes this construct. Parents fear that if children are allowed to challenge parental authority, they will become "acting-out" and disrespectful. Hence, obedience and complete compliance to parental authority is demanded. When children's power and independence are oppressed, they are not allowed to challenge, to voice opinions, or to have choices, but rather are told to "do what they are told to do" without question. This demand for compliance to parental authority has many limitations.

1. *Obedience breeds powerlessness.* When independence is not fostered as a state of growth, the feeling of dependence becomes a dominant personality trait. For young children, the ability to say "no" is a way of establishing boundaries and developing a sense of power, both necessary for success in life.
2. *Obedience breeds inadequacy.* By demanding obedience, parents model that power is something to be used on others to get them to do what you want. Power is equated to control and the more power you have, the more control you can exert on others. Powerlessness, excessive dependence, and a sense of personal inadequacy are common traits of many obedient children.
3. *Obedience also breeds rebelliousness.* Power struggles, acting out behavior, disobedience are all common behaviors resulting from years of obedience and complete yield to parental rule.
4. *Obedience often breeds non-discriminatory compliance.* Doing only what one is told to do often teaches children a generalized learned response of compliance. When those in perceived power make a demand, like a child's peer group, the learned response is to

comply. In the experimental world of teenagers, the ability to stay away from drugs and alcohol, vandalism, and crimes against the community are overwhelmed with feelings of compliance.

Responses to the AAPI-2 are presented in a Parenting Profile that depicts standard scores (sten scores) in a normal distribution range of 1 to 10. Scores that fall in the sten range of 1 to 3 represent about 16% of the population and indicate strong agreement with abusive and neglecting parenting practices. Sten scores in the 4 to 7 range represent 68% of the population and are commonly considered Low Average (4), Average (5 and 6), and High Average (7). Scores in the 8 to 10 sten range also represent about 16% of a normal population and indicate above average agreement with nurturing parenting behaviors.

### **Validity and Reliability of the AAPI-2**

The validity and reliability of the AAPI-2 and its predecessors have been established in over 25 years of research (Bavolek & Keene, 2002). General findings include:

- Abusive parents express significantly ( $p < .001$ ) more abusive attitudes than non-abusive parents.
- Males, regardless of status (abusive or non-abusive), express significantly more abusive parenting attitudes than females.
- Adolescents with histories of being abused express significantly ( $p < .001$ ) more abusive parenting attitudes than adolescents without histories of abuse.
- Each of the five parenting constructs of the AAPI-2, forming the five sub-scales of the inventory, show significant diagnostic and discriminatory validity. That is, responses to the inventory discriminate between the parenting attitudes of known abusive parents and the attitudes of non-abusive parents. These findings also hold true for abused adolescents and non-abused adolescents.

### **Procedures**

Florida agencies offering parent education programs to families referred to DCF for child abuse and/or neglect and receiving state funding were required to participate in the research project. Parents attending parenting programs throughout the state were administered Form A of the AAPI-2 as the pretest and Form B as the posttest. There were no State requirements to the type of parenting programs an agency had to offer. The purpose of the study was to assess the effectiveness of the existing parenting programs to determine which of the interventions produced the greatest change.

Representative staff from each agency participating in the study was invited to attend a one-day workshop on the background, development, interpretation and administration of the AAPI-2. Completed inventories were sent to a central location to be scored and returned. Summary data were kept on all completed inventories for each participating agency. Agencies received monthly reports detailing all matched (pre and posttests) and unmatched data. At year's end, a complete summary report was submitted to each provider agency and a comprehensive report was submitted to the State Office.

### **Findings – Demographics**

1. In the first five years FY 1999 to 2004, 116 different agencies throughout Florida have participated in the study.
2. A total of 22 agencies had implemented the Nurturing Parenting Programs, totaling 9147 matched pairs of data. Of this total, 8 agencies implemented the *Nurturing Program for Parents and Their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers* (Birth to 5) totaling 5,195 matched pairs. Fourteen (14) agencies implemented the *Nurturing Program for Parents and Their School-Age Children* (5 to 12) totaling 3,952 matched pairs.

3. Of the remaining 94 agencies, 66 agencies indicated they did not use a specific curriculum or made up their own programs from a composite of other programs. Twenty-eight (28) agencies utilized other published parenting curricula.
4. A total of 33,001 AAPIs have been completed and submitted for scoring and analyses. Of this total, 11, 061 matched cases (pre and posttest) were utilized for comparison of program outcome data.
5. The data presented in Appendix A provides a detailed review of the number and percentages of various population demographic characteristics. The data are presented in three categories: 0 = non-Nurturing Program; 1 = Nurturing Program for Parents and Their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers (Birth – 5); 2 = Nurturing Program for Parents and Their School-Age Children (5 to 12).

The highlights of the *Demographic Data* include:

- a. Approximately 76% of the parents are female; 24% are male.
- b. Approximately 64% of the parents are White; 25% Black; 9% Hispanic.
- c. Neglect (67%) was the most frequently reported referral for parenting; abuse constituted only 6% of the referrals.
- d. The vast majority of parents (55%) earned under \$25,000 annually; 13% earned under \$15,000.

### **Findings – Program Comparative Analyses**

The data presented in Appendix B presents the *statistical analyses* of Nurturing and non-Nurturing Parenting groups.

1. Parents who completed the Birth to Five Nurturing Parenting Program had significantly ( $p < .001$ ) higher posttest mean scores in each of the five Construct areas of the AAPI-2 than parents in the non-Nurturing Parenting Program groups.
2. Parents who completed the School-Age (5 to 12) Nurturing Parenting Program had significantly ( $p < .001$ ) higher posttest mean scores in each of the five Construct areas of the AAPI-2 than parents in the non-Nurturing Parenting Program groups.
3. Parents who completed the School-Age (5 to 12) Nurturing Parenting Program had significantly higher posttest scores than parents who completed the Birth to Five Nurturing Parenting Program.

### **Findings – AAPI Risk Percentages**

The data located in Appendix C presents the AAPI *Sten Score Distribution* by Construct. Scores in the 1 to 3-sten range are highly indicative of abuse and neglect. One standard of success implemented by DCF of Florida is that 80% of the posttest scores should fall within the 4 to 10 sten score range. The higher the sten score, the more positive the parenting attitudes.

A review of the data in Appendix C presents the percentage of posttest scores that fell in the 1 to 3-sten range for the non-Nurturing Parenting Program groups and the Birth to Five and 5 to 12 Nurturing Parenting Program groups. The non-Nurturing Parenting Program groups' posttest scores in the 1 to 3-sten range ranged from 30% to 39%. For the Birth to Five Nurturing Program groups, 1 to 3 posttest scores ranged from 20% to 34%. For the 5 to 12 Nurturing Program groups, 1 to 3 posttest sten scores ranged from 18% to 31%.

In all five Construct areas, there was a higher percentage of 1 to 3 posttest sten score for the non-Nurturing Parenting Program groups.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Based on the data presented in this report, the following conclusions can be made:

1. In comparison to other published and non-published parenting programs, both the Nurturing Parenting Program for Parents and their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers (Birth to 5) and the Nurturing Parenting Program for Parents and their School-Age Children (5 to 12) displayed significantly higher post test mean scores in each of the five subscales of the AAPI-2. The findings support the continued validation of both Programs as effective interventions for families referred for child abuse and neglect.
2. Posttest scores that fall within the 1 to 3 sten range are indicative of abusive and neglecting parenting attitudes. While both the Nurturing Parenting Programs and the non-Nurturing Parenting Programs had posttest scores fall into this range, the percentage of scores from the non-Nurturing Parenting Program groups were consistently higher in each of the five subscales of the AAPI-2. In essence, a higher percentage of parents completed their parenting programs but retained abusive and neglecting parenting attitudes. This is significant because of the cost of recidivism to the families and the Department of Children and Families. The goal of intervention is to stop the recurrence of abuse and neglect to children. It is imperative for the health and welfare of families that effective parenting programs be implemented to families in need of help.
3. Validated parenting programs, and in particular family based programs that address the specific needs of families in crisis, need to be an important consideration for all agencies providing parenting services to families. Ad hoc or unproven programs leave too much responsibility for successful treatment to the parent educators. The National Registry of Effective Programs and Practices (NREPP) identifies and supports programs with proven effectiveness like the Nurturing Parenting Programs. It seems appropriate for agencies to consult the list of NREPP programs and provide proven programs to families in need.