

**Boulder County Department of Social Services
Nurturing Program**

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Abstract

Parental violence directed toward children has existed for centuries, but social norms serving to define child abuse and set it apart from accepted forms of discipline have varied greatly over time. Only recently have laws and formal programs sought to establish a uniform definition of child abuse, monitor and report its incidence, and correct those conditions believed to be its root cause. One program designed to break the chain of abuse from one generation to the next is the Nurturing Program®, a system of tests, curriculum and teaching methods, aimed at parents and children in homes where physical abuse is believed to be a present or potential problem. Boulder County, Colorado offers the Nurturing Program® (NP) as an intervention option in cases of substantiated or suspected child abuse. Fifty-three participants in the NP class in Longmont, Colorado during 1991 and 1992 were sampled to assess that program's effectiveness. An interrupted time-series study was performed, spanning the interval from first observation through one year post-intervention. No substantiated re-abuse was found in the study population during this one year period. The observed rate of re-abuse was below that of the only other available study of this kind. Follow-up study is recommended to further assess program effectiveness and detect patterns useful in the prediction and prevention of child abuse.

Boulder County Department of Social Services Nurturing Program

Child abuse is not a new social phenomenon. For centuries, physical punishment was thought to be necessary to educate and discipline children. Prior to the 1940s, children were discouraged from engaging in anti-social behaviors through the use of physical punishment (Walters & Grusec ,1977, p. 2). "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is an old maxim that signified such societal rules. Soon after World War II, social attitudes began to swing toward greater leniency. The post-war atmosphere of peace and tranquility encouraged a less punitive approach to child-rearing. During the 1970s, the disciplinary social pendulum began to swing back from the permissiveness of the 1950s and 1960s toward more severe parental discipline and restrictiveness (Walters & Grusec,1977, p.4).

Historically, from the time of the Hammurabi Code, parents have had exclusive control over their children's lives. The concept of child abuse and subsequent intervention by the legal system did not manifest itself in this country until 1875 (Resick & Sweet, 1979, p. 141). Child abuse reporting laws were passed in every state between 1963 and 1967 and Congress passed the first Child Abuse and Treatment Act in 1973 (Pleck, 1987, p. 173). Public awareness and concern about the use of physical punishment and the escalation from punishment to abuse has also increased dramatically since the 1970s. This increase in awareness can be linked to the on-going public debate regarding how our society chooses to define child abuse.

The broadest definition of child abuse puts it within a continuum of behaviors that ranges from mild physical punishment to extreme violence. Legal definitions for child abuse and neglect run the gamut from acts of omission to acts of commission. The complexity surrounding the issue of defining child abuse arises from the issue of the general cultural acceptance of physical punishment in child rearing practices.

This broad scope of definitions for child abuse also influences estimates of the number of child abuse and neglect cases in this country. In the state of Colorado alone, over 9,230 substantiated cases of child abuse were reported in 1992 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). The federal government reports over 918,260 cases of substantiated child abuse and neglect in 1994 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

Given that abuse affects so many children in our society, attention to evaluation of interventive effectiveness seems crucial. Cohn and Daro (1987) examined the findings of four major federally funded evaluation studies. A total of 89 intervention programs were studied. Overall, the studies showed that, among parents served, one-third continued to abuse their children while involved in an intervention program, and over one-half of the individuals were judged by staff as likely to abuse their children following termination of the intervention treatment.

A study conducted by Ferleger, Glenwick, Gaines & Green (1988) showed similar results. They examined child abusers while in treatment and reported re-abuse rates ranging from 16 to 66%.

Despite numerous advances in research, the field of child protection remains notable more for what is not known compared to what has been discovered. One reason knowledge about interventions is especially limited is an apparent lack of commitment to careful evaluation, according to Cohn & Daro (1987). As costs for human service programs continue to rise and funding levels decrease, provision of effective, high quality programs of intervention become a priority.

Research Purpose

This research examined the adult portion of the group-based, educational program, the Nurturing Program®, for the purpose of describing its use as an intervention tool and exploring outcomes.

The Nurturing Program® Theoretical Foundation and Philosophy

The authors of the Nurturing Program® (NP) state that the ability to raise children successfully is largely a learned behavior and of all the possible formative influences that shape our attitudes and behavior related to parenting, our own parents are the most important influence. "We spend the majority of our early years with our parents experiencing, witnessing, and modeling their interaction patterns with us and other members of our family" (Bavolek and Comstock, 1985, p.2).

Stephen J. Bavolek, principal author of the Nurturing Program® (see Appendix A), uses the perpetuation theory of abuse as described in the early works of Steele & Pollack (1968) and Martin (1976) as the main theory supporting his belief that children who are abused will also abuse when they become parents unless interventions take place.

To interrupt the generational perpetuation of dysfunctional parenting practices, education in appropriate parenting and child rearing is, the "single most important treatment and prevention strategy" (Bavolek & Comstock, 1985, p.3).

Nurturing Program Description

The Nurturing Program for Parents and Children 4-12 Years® (NP) grew out of research and treatment efforts partially funded by a 1979 National Institute of Mental Health grant project designed to assess the needs and develop a program for parents who abuse and neglect their young children. The NP was copyrighted, packaged and made available for purchase in 1983.

It is marketed, along with a number of other packaged intervention programs and materials, "for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect," by Family Development Resources, Inc. (NPP Catalog, 1995).

The Nurturing Program for Parents and Children 4-12 Years® program series consists of fifteen 2½ hour sessions that meet one day a week for 15 consecutive weeks. Three separate groups meet: one for parents; one for children 4-8 years of age and one for children 9-12 years of age. One group facilitator is suggested for each seven children participating and two group facilitators for implementing the parents' program.

The activities for each session are designed to meet the stated long-term program goals. These goals are: (a) develop positive self-concept and self-esteem in all family members, (b) build an empathic awareness of the needs of others,

(c) teach alternatives to hitting and yelling, (d) increase awareness of self-needs, strengths and weaknesses, (e) increase family communication and expressiveness, (f) increase awareness of the developmental needs of other family members, (g) substitute nurturing parenting behaviors for abusive parenting practices, (h) promote healthy physical and emotional development of self and others, (i) build family support and cohesion, and (j) learn to have fun as a family (NPP Catalog, 1994, p.3).

Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory

The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) is the main instrument used within the Nurturing Program® (NP) to measure whether program participants have developed more nurturing parental attitudes as a result of completing a NP course. It is administered during the first session and once again upon completion of the program. The AAPI's 32 questions are based on the identification of four parenting and child rearing practices the authors found to be commonly associated with abusive parents. They are: (a) inappropriate parental expectations of the child, (b) lack of empathy toward children's needs, (c) a strong belief in the value of physical punishment as a proper disciplinary measure, and (d) parent-child role reversal.

Boulder County Department of Social Services Nurturing Program Description

Boulder County Department of Social Services (BCDSS) first implemented the NP in 1986. This was made possible with money raised in a community sponsored drive to help establish programs to prevent child abuse. During the first year, the program was run entirely by trained volunteers. The following year BCDSS included the project in its budget and hired professional staff.

Supplemental volunteers continue to be used as needed. Currently the program employs one full-time program coordinator and a half-time children's coordinator. It operates on an annual budget of \$6750, excluding salaries. The NP is conducted in three Boulder County locations, Longmont, Lafayette and Boulder 2½ hours weekly for 13 weeks in the fall and the spring. The number of sessions in a series was reduced from 15 to 13 weeks between 1991 and 1992 to coincide with the semester in each of the school districts. This is the only change that was found to have been made by BCDSS to the original NP model. Each series¹ is preceded by a one hour orientation session for parents.

Successful program completion requires that a participant attend weekly evening sessions (missing no more than three) and complete the AAPI as a pre-test and post-test. On average, approximately 80 parents graduate from the Boulder County locations each year. Approximately 50% of the referred individuals drop out within the first month. Referrals to this program are made by BCDSS case workers and are part of a case plan which may include other interventions.

There is no limit on parents' or children's class size. The parents' class is conducted by the program coordinator with help from one or two volunteer co-facilitators. The children's group is supervised by the children's coordinator with the help of adult volunteers at a ratio of about five children to one adult.

Methodology

The author's of the Nurturing Program's[®] assert that the program can produce positive changes in parental attitudes to make them more "nurturing" parents.

This assertion is supported by additional, independent research on improved AAPI scores (Bavolek, 1990). Only one long-term follow-up study² has been published which measures participants re-abuse rates - the behavioral outcome that improved attitudes are aimed at producing.

It was the purpose of this study to examine the occurrence of re-abuse by NP graduates over months following their graduation. One way to measure this behavior was to count incidents of substantiated re-abuse by program participants.

Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. What is the rate of occurrence of substantiated abuse and neglect³ - the re-abuse rate⁴ - for all program participants during the one-year period following completion of the Nurturing Program[®] in 1991 and 1992 in Longmont, Colorado?
2. Did court-ordered individuals have a higher re-abuse rate than voluntary participants during the one-year period following completion of the Nurturing Program[®] in 1991 and 1992 in Longmont, Colorado?

Population & Data Collection

The population studied was all 53 adult participants who completed the Nurturing Program[®] (NP) at Boulder County Department Social Services (BCDSS) in Longmont, CO during 1991 and 1992, series numbers 14, 15, 16 and 17. The 1991 and 1992 series were chosen because prior to 1991, NP participant records were unavailable.

The re-abuse data (see Appendix B) were obtained from archival records from Nurturing Program® (NP) participants' case files and Boulder County computerized records. Archival records were chosen because: (a) records were available, (b) records could be easily coded and presented as group data without compromising participant confidentiality, and (c) client interviews would have provided useful information but were not available because of confidentiality.

Descriptions of the program and referral process were obtained in interviews with program coordinators, administrators and from a questionnaire that was given to all BCDSS case workers in the Longmont office (see Appendix C).

Research Design

The research design used was an interrupted time-series. This design was selected for use with re-abuse data because: (a) it establishes a baseline for analyzing program effectiveness, (b) this quasi-experimental design was useful because both pre- and post- intervention⁵ observations were possible, (c) the longitudinal design was optimal for observing whether the effects are lasting; and (d) this was a suitable design for using archival data. For purposes of this study the Colorado Children's Code was used as the standard for defining child abuse and neglect.

All substantiated incidents of abuse and neglect which occurred in the study sample from the first observation through the one year post-intervention period were counted. Substantiated abuse and neglect for each member of the study sample was prerequisite to participation in this study. The units of observation and the units of analysis for this study were individual program participants.

Discussion

No substantiated re-abuse was found to have been attributed to any of the 53 program participants within a year of their completing the Nurturing Program®. This is a lower re-abuse rate than was found in the only other available study of this kind, conducted in 1983 by Bavolek, Comstock, and McLaughlin. It could be said that this finding supports the NP authors' claim that the program is effective in "preventing and treating child abuse and neglect." Certainly, it does not contradict that claim. We are aware, however, that the 1991 and 1992 sampling might not be representative of all Nurturing Program® participants in Boulder County.

Data gathered from this study of abusive individuals completing the NP in Boulder County indicated 93% of the participants are no longer receiving services from Boulder County Department of Social Services for child abuse and neglect. Another longitudinal follow-up study including data from the Colorado Central Registry for Child Abuse and Neglect could provide more information about the participants after their cases are closed in Boulder County.

In this study, court-ordered individuals (N=25) were not found to have a higher re-abuse rate than voluntary participants (N=28) during the one-year follow-up period. The idea that participants who had already abused would be more likely to re-abuse was not supported by the data.

Recommendations

Program quality and future research could be enhanced if BCDSS Management of Information Systems (MIS) expanded the Boulder County computerized system to include pertinent data that would enable NP staff to track participants after completion of the program. Also, examining the records of those who drop out might answer the questions listed below and thus provide valuable information that could add to reality-based program planning and effectiveness.

1. Who are they?
2. Why did they drop out?
3. What was their re-abuse rate?
4. What can be done to decrease this rate?

Evaluation research can help an agency keep its commitment to its mission and to the goals and objectives of its programs. However, little systematic outcome research has been conducted to determine the effectiveness of programs implemented for protection, treatment and prevention of child abuse and neglect (Resick & Sweet, 1979, p.150). This study adds to the knowledge about outcome-based intervention programs and the authors hope that this information will spur efforts to further develop, practice, evaluate, and disseminate intervention techniques and programs that have shown promise such as the Nurturing Program®.

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Appendix A

Bavolek: The Nurturing Program Author

Stephen J. Bavolek received a doctorate in 1978 from Utah State University and completed a post-doctoral internship at the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect in Denver, CO. He has held faculty positions at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire and the University of Utah. He has worked with emotionally disturbed children and adolescents in schools and residential settings and abused children and abusive parents in treatment programs. He has conducted research in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect and is the principal author of the Nurturing Parenting Programs, programs designed to prevent and treat abuse and neglect. he presently is president of Family Development resources, Inc. which markets the Nurturing Parenting Programs, related materials, videos and games (Bavolek & Comstock, 1985).

Appendix B

Data Collection Instrument

RESEARCH PROJECT ID #: _ _ - _ _

1. Household court-ordered? YES ___ NO ___
2. Were any children from this household in foster care or a out-of-home placement at the **time of intervention**?
NO ___ YES ___ Date Placed: ___/___/___ Date Returned ___/___/___
3. Was substantiated abuse or neglect recorded in this household during **intervention period**? NO ___ YES ___ (# of times: ___)
4. Were any children from this household placed in foster care or an out-of-home placement **from the beginning of intervention through post-intervention period**?
NO ___ YES ___ Date Placed: ___/___/___
Date Returned ___/___/___
5. Were parental rights in this household terminated during **post-intervention period**? NO ___ YES ___
6. During **post-intervention period** was substantiated abuse or neglect recorded in this household?
NO ___ YES ___ (# of times: ___)
Dates recorded: _____ / _____

Appendix C

Case Worker Questionnaire

Note: Responses and information provided will be kept strictly confidential. No names or identifying information will be recorded. Responses will only be reported as group data.

1. Have you ever made referrals to the BCDSS Nurturing Program[©] ?
2. How many would you estimate per year?
3. Have you ever had a referral refused? If yes, why?
4. How do you choose who is referred to Nurturing Program[©]?
5. What changes do you expect to see in a client who participated in the Nurturing Program[©]?
6. How often would you estimate you get the results you expect?
7. Do the immediate effects you notice in clients after they complete the Nurturing Program[©] seem to last?
8. Do you follow-up with the Nurturing Program[©] coordinator and/or the family after the client completes the program?
9. Do you refer clients to the Nurturing Program[©] multiple times?
10. What do you see as the strengths of the Nurturing Program[©]?
11. What do you see as the weaknesses of the Nurturing Program[©]?
12. Do you have any suggestions for changes to the BCDSS Nurturing Program[©] ?

Extended Literature Review

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Footnotes

1. Series Number is a numeric code used by Boulder County Department of Social Services to identify each Nurturing Program® class. Series numbers represent the year and session of the program. The program is offered two times a year.

Series 14 = Spring class of 1991
Series 15 = Fall class of 1991
Series 16 = Spring class of 1992
Series 17 = Fall class of 1992
2. This year-long follow-up study of abusive families completing the program indicated recidivism was seven percent; that is seven of 95 adults in a test group completing the program in 1983 had been charged with additional counts of child abuse and neglect during the year following completion of the program. This research also indicated 42 % of the families were no longer receiving services from county departments of social services.
3. Defined as those case determines as such by Boulder County Department of Social Services (BCDSS) Child Investigation Unit personnel in cooperation with police and] other professionals in accordance with Colorado Children's Code (see Appendix D).
4. Study definition of reabuse rate: one instance of substantiated abuse or neglect by a program participant during one-year period following completion of the program will be considered a 100 percent reabuse rate for that individual.
5. Study intervention was the 13 week Nurturing Program®.