

Long-Term Impact of the Nurturing Program:
A Comparison of Parenting Attitudes of Abusive and
Neglectful Parents Pre-program, Post-Program, and
at One Year Post-Program Follow-up

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Long-term Impact of the Nurturing Program: A comparison of Parenting Attitudes of Abusive and Neglectful Parents pre-program, post-program, and at one year post-program follow-up.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the immediate and sustained impact of the Nurturing Program on the parenting attitudes of abusive and neglectful parents who have come to the attention of Social Service Agencies. Such an assessment would lead to: 1) determination of short-term and long-term effectiveness as a component of a treatment plan for abusive and neglectful parents; 2) determination of program strengths and weaknesses, affecting conjunctive interventions in treating these parents; 3) determination of implications for continued use of the Nurturing Program in such treatment. Utilizing the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) to measure parenting attitudes and four constructs: Empathy, Role Reversal, Expectations, and Belief in Corporal Punishment, a pretest, post-test, and follow-up test one year after program completion were conducted. The results showed that the majority of parents exhibited statistically significant movement towards non-abusive parenting profiles on each construct at the completion of the program. Follow-up data indicated that the majority of those tested maintained their non-abusive profiles more than one year after completing the program. Moreover, nearly 50% showed continued statistically significant increases in positive parenting attitudes on each of the four constructs. A small percentage did not maintain non-abusive profiles on the constructs of Empathy and Role Reversal. Further inquiry into this reversal revealed difficult life circumstances and little support for positive parenting, indicating that existing appropriate attitudes toward parenting are strongly influenced by environment.

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Background:

Referrals to Child Protective Services involving abuse, neglect, and serious family conflict have shown a continual increase over the last several years. Traditional interventions focusing primarily on pathology have not proven highly effective in interrupting complex multi-generational patterns of child maltreatment. More often, social workers are beginning to work with the third generation of families who have previously received services for abuse and neglect with no long term interruption of these patterns, resulting in the transmission of these patterns to the next generation of parents and children. It has long been stated that family violence begets a generational cycle of violence. This cycle has basically been attributed to learning violence as a way of coping with feelings of inadequacy and frustration. In light of current research, it would appear that social learning theory can only partially explain why this cycle continues. Children in violent families are highly at risk for attachment problems and resultant complications i.e. meeting her/his needs without regard to the effects of her/his behavior on others. Parents in a violent home have quite often experienced physical and emotional deprivation and will most likely neglect the emotional needs of their children as their own needs are not met.

Bowlby (1975, Pg. 135) states: "There is a strong causal relationship between an individual's experiences with his parents and his later capacity to make affectional bonds." In her book Attachment & Separation, Fahlberg (1979) stresses that adequate physical care is simply not enough to lead to the development of a physically and psychologically healthy child. The development of attachment is the core of meeting basic social and personality needs, such as maintaining self-esteem and being empathic toward others (Fishbein, 1984). The lack of ability to empathize with the needs of others has been identified as a distinct contributor to child abuse and to the transmission of abuse across generations (Bavolek & Comstock).

Bolton states that many parents turn to their children to meet their emotional needs, a role in which the child cannot succeed due to developmental limitations and a lack of training in meeting needs, as his or her needs have not been met.

The parents will then react with frustration and aggression (1983).

Inappropriate expectations of children has also been found to be one of the 4 distinct patterns of inappropriate parenting which contribute to child abuse and neglect as identified by Bavolek & Comstock.

A third pattern identified by Bavolek and Comstock is that of parent-child reversal of family roles. In a family system, there is a power hierarchy in the sense that one person has more authority and more responsibility in determining what happens than other members do. Generally, this authority falls to the parents, with differing levels of authority and responsibility assigned to other members of the family system. Current family therapy theory and practice emphasize that confusion or conflict within this hierarchy can result in a variety of pathologic interactions (Minuchin, 1974, Haley, 1980, 1987, Madanes, 1981)

Parent education programs have been utilized in the past to address skill development for parents, providing behavior management techniques as alternatives to corporal punishment. A strong belief in corporal punishment has been found to be directly related to abuse when the patterns discussed previously are also involved.

Is addressing behavior management enough to alter abuse and neglect patterns in families who have been brought to the attention of Child Protective Services? The question becomes two-fold:

1. how can the generational patterns of abuse and neglect be interrupted in the current family functioning, and
2. how can this change be maintained in the present and in the next generation?

Current research would suggest that the 4 distinct patterns of inappropriate parenting associated with child abuse and neglect would all need to be addressed in order to fully have effects upon the patterns of child maltreatment. In providing interventions to abusive and neglectful parents, the psychological needs of the parents would need to be taken into account as well as the needs of the children, as meeting of needs for one appears to be determined by the meeting of needs of the other. Further, involvement of the entire family to promote positive interactions and reinforcement, practice of new interactional patterns, and real system change would be seen as necessary.

The Nurturing Program was chosen as an intervention by Licking County Department of Human Services, Children's Services Division, due to its comprehensive nature in addressing the treatment of abusive and neglectful families.

Program Description:

The Nurturing Program is a group-based program for parents and children which embraces the philosophy that a family system needs to be reached both cognitively and emotionally in order to make changes toward healthy child rearing practices and general family functioning. Developed by Stephen Bavolek, Ph.D. and Christine Comstock, the program adheres to a 5-point philosophy of raising healthy children.

1. The family is a system and all members must be involved in learning new skills if change is to occur in that system.
2. All families experience healthy and unhealthy interactions to some degree.
3. Adults and children learn on two levels: cognitive and emotive. Effective education/intervention must engage the learner on both levels.
4. A major goal of the Nurturing Program is to help family members to increase positive self-esteem and self-concept, as nurturing comes easier to those who feel good about themselves.
5. If given a choice, all families prefer healthy, positive interactions over abusive, negative interactions.

The Nurturing Program involves parents and children in a 15-week program which meets weekly for 2-1/2 hours. Each session is presented with specific goals and objectives, and procedures for carrying out program activities. Activity manuals and audio/visual programs are used to teach families new skills. Parents and children meet separately in respective groups to learn these skills. Professionals who have experienced working with adults and children in group and individual settings can effectively use this program.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study was to assess the immediate and sustained impact of the Nurturing Program on the parenting attitudes of abusive and neglectful parents who have come to the attention of Social Service Agencies. Such assessment would lead to: 1) determination of short-term and long-term program effectiveness as part of a treatment plan for abusive and neglectful parents; 2) determination of program weaknesses/strengths that can have an impact on parenting attitudes and the subsequent development of conjunctive interventions to increase that

effectiveness; and 3) determination of the implications of continued implementation of the Nurturing Program in the treatment of abusive and neglectful families.

Procedures:

The Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI), developed by Bavolek, Kline, and McLaughlin (1978), was utilized to assess adults who were referred to the Nurturing Program by Licking County Children's Services due to substantiated reports of abuse and neglect in order to establish a base line of parenting attitudes prior to entering the program. The AAPI is a 32 item inventory designed to assess parenting and child rearing attitudes in four areas: A) inappropriate parental expectations of children; B) lack of parental empathy toward children's needs; C) belief in the use of corporal punishment as a means of disciplining children; and D) reversing parent-child roles. Research in utilizing the AAPI to assess parenting differences between abusive and non-abusive parents indicates abusive parents express significantly ($p < .001$) more abusive attitudes in each of the four parenting areas than non-abusive parents (Bavolek, 1982; Bavolek, 1984; Figoten and Tanner, 1981).

The AAPI was administered to 48 adults throughout 1989 who were identified by the Department of Human Services Children's Services, as physically abusive or neglectful. The data was gathered by the Nurturing Program coordinator prior to participation in the Nurturing Program and again at the completion of the 15-week program. One year after the completion of the program, participants were contacted to complete the AAPI again to determine whether the post-program attitudes were sustained long-term. Of the 48 previous participants, 25 completed the AAPI, 12 were unlocatable, 1 was deceased, and 10 chose not to participate in the follow-up study.

Results:

Comparison of AAPI profiles of program participants at the pre and post test level indicated that program participation positively effected participants on each of the four constructs:

Table I: Percent of adults showing statistically significant movement towards non-abusive adult profiles

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Expectations	<u>87%</u>
Empathy	<u>75%</u>
Corporal Punishment	<u>90%</u>
Roles	<u>93%</u>

Positive impact was determined by an increase of one or more STEN Scores on each of the constructs.

Further analysis indicated that an average or above average profile based upon non-abusive adult norms was obtained by the majority of adults indicating statistically significant positive movement on each construct:

Table II: Percentage of adults exhibiting non-abusive adult profiles at program completion

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Expectations	<u>83%</u>
Empathy	<u>58%</u>
Corporal Punishment	<u>88%</u>
Roles	<u>83%</u>

While there were subjects who did not obtain an average to above average profile, some showed statistically significant movement in a positive direction on individual constructs:

Table III: Percentage of adults showing statistically significant movement toward non-abusive adult profiles while not attaining this profile

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Expectations	<u>4%</u>
Empathy	<u>17%</u>
Corporal Punishment	<u>02%</u>
Roles	<u>10%</u>

Follow-up data was collected from 52% of the original sample through utilization of the AAPI one year to one year, six months after the completion of the Nurturing Program.

Of those participating in the long-term follow-up, the majority sustained their overall improved profile on the AAPI. Those participants who did not sustain a positive profile showed a regression on the constructs of empathy and role reversal.

Table IV: Percentage of adults showing a positive profile at follow-up

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Expectations	<u>92%</u>
Empathy	<u>64%</u>
Corporal Punishment	<u>92%</u>
Roles	<u>72%</u>

A small percentage of adults showed a statistically significant positive movement towards an average profile for non-abusive adults without attaining the average range:

Table V: Percentage of adults showing statistically significant movement towards non-abusive adult profile while not attaining such profiles

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Pre-Test to Follow-Up Percentage</u>	<u>Post-Test to Follow-Up Percentage</u>
Expectations	0%	0%
Empathy	8%	4.4%
Corporal Punishment	8%	4.4%
Roles	8%	0%

The total percentage of positively impacted participants of the Nurturing Program on each of the 4 constructs is indicated below from Pre-Test to Follow-Up Test:

Table VI: Percentage of adults showing positive impact from Baseline to Follow-Up at one (1) year

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Expectations	<u>76%</u>
Empathy	<u>68%</u>
Corporal Punishment	<u>76%</u>
Roles	<u>76%</u>

In a comparison of post-test profiles with follow-up test profiles, it was noted that a large percentage of participants continued to alter their parenting attitudes in a positive manner over the year following program participation. The percentage of participants exhibiting continued statistically significant positive change on each of the 4 constructs after completion of the program are indicated below:

Table VII: Percentage of adults exhibiting statistically significant continued positive movement one (1) year after program completion

<u>Construct</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Expectations	<u>56.5%</u>
Empathy	<u>39.0%</u>
Corporal Punishment	<u>65.0%</u>
Roles	<u>48.0%</u>

Discussion:

The Nurturing Program has been shown to have a positive impact on the parenting attitudes of participants in 4 areas which are directly correlated with abuse and neglect. The findings suggest that most families completing the program were able to make appropriate changes in hierarchy within their family system, alter

their expectations of family members to a more appropriate level, and accept and use alternative discipline methods. Involvement of children in the program most likely enhance the probability of attitude change and subsequent reorganization of the family. While no standardized tests are available to assess change in the children, it would stand to reason that preparing children for changes in the family would lead to more positive reinforcement of parents' efforts, thus supporting and encouraging continued utilization of Nurturing methods.

Of the constructs on which the program focused, the development of empathy appears to be the most difficult to develop and sustain within the families of this study. This may be due to the many emotional and concrete needs within these families. Many of the parents in this program were themselves past victims of abuse and neglect.

The majority of families participating in the program were able to obtain and maintain profiles consistent with those of non-abusive parents. Further, nearly half of those completing this study were able to continue to alter their parenting attitudes in a positive direction over the next year. This continued growth could most likely be due to continued assimilation and positive reinforcement of the methods learned through the program.

It would be noted that the results of this study may be somewhat skewed as a number of past participants chose not to participate when requested. The main reason given by those opting out of the study was that they had successfully gotten Children's Services out of their lives and preferred not to have them involved again in any capacity. An inference can be made that the positive impact that occurred during program participation has at least been sustained as no Children's Services involvement has been deemed necessary within the past year.

A small percentage of participants in this study showed a reversal on their profiles, with scores on the Empathy and Role Reversal Constructs dropping back into abusive parent profiles. All of the participants showing this reversal were women who were involved in abusive, dependent adult relationships. It is apparent that life circumstances do effect the ability to parent and can override knowledge of non-abusive and non-neglectful parenting styles, as these parents were able to obtain a non-abusive profile in a supportive group environment, and with guidance from a Children's Services' caseworker. Without continued support in some capacity, difficult life circumstances have the capacity to nullify recent attitudinal changes.

Implications for Practice:

Based upon the short-term and long-term profiles of participants in this program, it would be suggested that the Nurturing Program can be a highly effective component in the treatment of abusive and neglectful parents. Since life circumstances appear to affect parenting attitudes, other treatment components would be recommended to address those circumstances in order to maximize the effectiveness of this program on parenting attitudes. Since the 4 constructs measured by the AAPI have been shown to be related to child abuse and neglect, and the Nurturing Program has been shown to alter attitudes surrounding those constructs, it would be prudent to continue implementation of this program as part of the treatment plan for abusive and neglectful families. Conjunctive interventions focusing on building empathy and redirecting stressors on families would be important to maintaining gains in this program. While the Nurturing Program is not a panacea for child abuse cessation and prevention, it is certainly indicated as an important component in treatment, demonstrating long-term maintenance of treatment progress under most circumstances.

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