



**Evaluation of the Statewide Implementation of a
Parent Education Program in Louisiana's Child Welfare Agency:
The Nurturing Parenting Program for Infants,
Toddlers, and Pre-School Children**

Executive Summary

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Louisiana's child welfare system, not unlike others across the nation, has struggled with the identification and implementation of consistent, high-quality parent education and training as an intervention for parents involved in the system. In 2000, a review of parent education programs supported by the child welfare agency revealed huge variations in the content, duration, intensity, format, and cost (Hodnett, 2000). Despite being a state-run system, there was no coordinated planning, monitoring, or evaluation of these programs. These findings marked the beginning of a commitment and diligent effort by the Louisiana Department of Social Services/Office of Community Services to work toward a more deliberate and systematic approach to implementing and evaluating parent education programs to ensure effectiveness.

Parent education is one of the most commonly used interventions for abusive or high-risk parents in child welfare agencies across the country (Barth, Landsverk, Chamberlain, Reid, Rolls et al. 2005; Huebner, 2002; Hurlburt, Barth, Leslie, Landsverk, & McCrae, 2007). Yet due to limited monitoring of implementation and evaluation of outcomes, we know very little about the effectiveness of parent education interventions within child welfare populations and, particularly, as implemented within the limits of the child welfare system. However, there is a clear and legitimate expectation for child welfare agencies to move toward providing a more evidence-based array of parenting interventions.

Not surprisingly, the most rigorous research on parenting education and skill-building interventions has primarily focused on parenting for children experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties in mental health settings. While these children represent a portion of the child welfare population and these programs are a valuable resource to meet the specific needs of those children, the majority of families (60 percent) involved in the child welfare system are facing allegations of parental neglect (including medical neglect), and 32 percent of all victims are age 4 years and under (Administration for Children and Families, 2007). Clearly, there needs to be an emphasis on parenting issues in addition to, and other than, those relating to serious behavior problems in children. The parent-child relationship, specifically as it relates to nurturing, attachment, empathy, and parental insight into the needs of the child, must play a key role in improving parenting practices for this population.

In their ground-breaking analysis of parent-training programs in child welfare, Barth and colleagues (2005) made a compelling argument for the necessity of building an evidence base of parent training programs specifically used in child welfare agency settings. In particular, these parent training programs currently lack rigorous evaluation or implementation on a large enough scale within a child welfare system to withstand scrutiny. In partnership with Casey Family Programs, Louisiana's child welfare agency, the Office of Community Services (OCS), evaluated the Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) (Bavolek, 2005) as implemented on a statewide basis during 2006 and 2007. This study builds on the evidence base of parent training in child welfare by examining a large state-wide sample comprised exclusively of participants involved in the child welfare system following an allegation of abuse or neglect of one or more children in their care.

Specifically, the study examines the effectiveness of the NPP, a 16-week group and home-based program that targets parents and other caregivers of infants, toddlers, and pre-school children involved in the child welfare system. We address the following questions: (a) What is the effect of NPP participation on parental attitudes in a child welfare population and how is this associated with characteristics of parents and families and their level of program participation? (b) What is the effect of NPP participation on the incidence of maltreatment in a child welfare population and how is this associated with characteristics of parents and families and level of program participation? We also present data on parental satisfaction with the program and program cost.

Program Implementation

OCS contracts with 10 community-based social service providers across the state of Louisiana to operate a Family Resource Center (FRC) through which parenting services are offered. Extensive training and technical support was provided to FRC staff on the NPP prior to implementation in 2006.

Study Sample

The sample included 564 participants referred by OCS to the FRC who completed parent education and training related to their infant, toddler, or pre-school child. Seventy-five percent of the participants were female; 58 percent were white. The majority of participants were single parents with an average of 2.5 children; they had less than a high school education and lived in poverty. Just over half of the participants (54 percent) who responded to the question regarding their own abuse or neglect as a child confirmed that they had been abused or neglected.

Findings

The findings of this evaluation provide overall support for the continued use of the NPP in a child welfare setting for parents and other caregivers of infants, toddlers, and pre-school children. We found a high rate of client retention in the program, statistically significant improvement in parental attitudes toward childrearing, and a substantial reduction in repeat maltreatment. By compiling the data to conduct the analysis, we also found a critical need for close oversight of the implementation process as well as programmatic outcomes.

Client retention ranged from 46 percent to 85 percent across providers, with an overall retention rate of nearly 70 percent of program participants (n=564). This rate is significantly higher than research on other similar programs implemented in child welfare systems (Gershater-Molko, Lutzker, & Wesch, 2003). Considering the routine difficulty with client retention for those clients receiving child protective services (CPS) and the 16-week duration of this program, this rate of retention is encouraging.

Results demonstrated significant and positive improvements in all five Adult and Adolescent Parenting Inventory-2 (AAPI-2) subscales: (a) Inappropriate Parental Expectations, (b) Parental Lack of an Empathic Awareness of Children's Needs, (c) Strong Belief in the Use and Value of Corporal Punishment, (d) Parent-Child Role Reversal, and (e) Oppressing Children's Power and Independence. Furthermore, for all subscales of the AAPI-2, there was substantial movement from the high-risk category prior to participation to the low/medium-risk category following participation in the NPP.

Results also indicated that dosage does matter. For individuals who had high rates of attendance (attended at least 14 out of the 16 weeks), the odds of maltreating post-participation were 73 percent lower than for those with lower rates of attendance (OR=0.27). Consistent with other research, a one-incident increase in the number of prior incidences of maltreatment resulted in increased odds of maltreating post-participation

(OR=3.7). Repeat maltreatment among all program participants was 12 percent, a rate much lower than that found by many other similar studies.

It was expected that all sites would implement the 16-week group and home-based model consistently and assure the timely completion of measurement instruments and accurate case documentation. However, despite safeguards to protect against model drift, as statewide data were collected, it became evident that closer monitoring, oversight, and consultation were needed to maintain fidelity to the model in the challenging day-to-day reality of the child welfare system. Chaffin and Friedrich (2004) put it well: “Disseminating and implementing [evidence-based programs] across networks of independent providers is a daunting prospect” (p. 1105). Often, in response to attempting to meet the overwhelming and complex needs of families with the limited human and financial capacity of an agency, program changes are made and shortcuts are taken without full understanding of the potential impact to program fidelity and subsequent effectiveness.

Practice Implications

This evaluation provides several implications for child welfare agencies to consider in planning, delivering, and monitoring parent education and training services. Overall, attention to process and outcomes are equally important. The use of an evidence-based program in and of itself is not enough. The importance of matching the program to the target population it is designed to serve and has demonstrated effectiveness with, and assuring model fidelity in the delivery of the program’s essential components, cannot be overemphasized. In addition, it is critical to recognize the impact of a facilitator’s interpersonal skills, educational background, and buy-in surrounding accurate documentation and data collection on program success.

Research has been consistent in finding that longer-term interventions are necessary to make sustained changes in individuals and families with multiple, complex issues. These are the families that make up a large portion of the child welfare system, so dedicating sufficient resources to do it right is a battle worth fighting. Particularly in the reality of under-resourced child welfare systems, it is a constant struggle to provide a high-quality service and still serve the number of families that agencies are expected to serve; yet when child safety and well-being are at stake, our families deserve no less.

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