

Positive Parenting, Better Behavior

Brief intervention curbs conduct problems, improves school readiness

Their objective was to help prevent young children from developing problem behaviors later in life. To that end, university researchers seven years ago began to investigate whether they could, in only a few relatively brief sessions, help parents in at-risk families become more effective and positive in their parenting, such as by helping them develop warmer, more trusting relationships with their children.

What researchers didn't anticipate was that, in addition to seeing fewer conduct problems, they would find that important school readiness skills improved for many children in those families.

More than 730 families eligible for a national food supplement program in Pittsburgh, Eugene, Ore. and Charlottesville, Va. were offered the intervention, known as the Family Check-Up, beginning when their child or children were 2 years old.

The intervention is designed to address disrupted and unskilled family management practices in early childhood by motivating and helping parents to make constructive changes. It is often delivered by therapists in the family's home. And it is relatively brief, with parents averaging about four sessions with a therapist a year.

Yet, gains were seen in positive parenting, children demonstrated fewer behavior problems, and self-regulation and literacy skills among children aged 2 to 4 years improved.

"The beauty of this to me is that we are getting families who traditionally had been very hard to reach. We are

getting them to start to connect with us and, despite all of their adversity, they are making the effort to do something about the trajectory of their children's behavior before it gets out of control," said Daniel Shaw, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh.

Dr. Shaw, Thomas Dishion, PhD, of the University of Oregon and several of their colleagues began investigating the Family Check-Up in 2001.

Focus On Parenting

In their investigation of the Family Check-Up, researchers narrowed participation to families dealing with poverty and other serious risk factors. Families, for example, had to be income-eligible for the federal Women, Infants and Children Nutrition program and at least one child had to be viewed by parents as having behavior problems.

The emphasis on promoting positive parenting is supported by scientific

"The idea is to motivate positive parent behavior," says Daniel Shaw, professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. "If we talk about the depression of the parent, instead of saying, 'You're depressed and should do something about it,' we say, 'You know, that could be affecting your child's welfare.'"

evidence that suggests parenting practices are central to behavior and adjustment problems that develop in children.

Studies have reported, for example, that negative and neglectful parenting can predict problem behavior later in children's lives. And harsh and punitive parenting makes it much more likely that children already at risk of problem behaviors will develop them.

On the other hand, promoting appropriate parenting practices during early childhood has emerged as a solution to the development of problem behaviors. Such practices include parents developing warm, trusting relationships with their young children and being more attentive and involved.

A Brief Check-Up

The Family Check Up begins with a comprehensive assessment of family functioning that includes observation of parenting practices, relationships, child

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characteristics and other factors related to the family, child and home environment.

Families initially receive a Get-To-Know-You visit during which perceptions and concerns related to their family setting and children's behavior are explored. During a feedback visit, parent consultants share data obtained from the comprehensive assessment, focusing on parent and family strengths and possible areas of change. Skills commonly emphasized include using positive reinforcement to promote children's prosocial behavior and anticipating situations when behavior might become a problem.

Families can also take part in additional interventions to address "red areas" – issues identified as needing improvement. The intervention helps to link them to services they may need and provides them with a contact who they can call if they need help or advice. It also provides for an annual check-up, giving families an opportunity to address previously identified concerns they initially chose not to work on.

The 'Terrible Twos'

Behaviors associated with children around the age of two years were among the most common concerns of parents participating in the intervention. These include children not listening or minding their parents, oppositional behavior and aggression.

"Most of it is aggression toward siblings and not listening to parents, which is normative for that period," Dr. Shaw said. "We know that a lot of kids will just grow out of it. We also know parental response can magnify the original problem, making it much worse than the initial complaint, so we want parents to get a handle on it."

The most common identified concern families tend not to address in the

first year is a parent's depression. Instead, many families chose to deal with depression during subsequent annual check-ups.

Outcomes Show Promise

Participating in the Family Check-Up paid off, studies suggest. Parents improved their ability to provide positive behavior support at child ages 2 and 3 years, and problem behavior among children decreased at ages 2, 3 and 4 years. The percentage of children with high scores for problem behavior, for example, fell from more than 48% at age 2 years to less than 24% at age 4.

The precise reasons for the outcomes are unclear. "In terms of the intervention, it seems to be loaded around parents learning to be more positive to their kids and learning to anticipate, which are skills that are fairly easy to teach," Dr. Shaw said.

Children in families who received the Family Check-Up also showed improvement in inhibitory control and language development from age 3 to 4, suggesting the benefits of positive parenting extend beyond child behavior. And these out-

comes were seen among families who averaged only 3.7 sessions with a therapist during the first year.

Further, there appeared to be no dose response – that is, the number of sessions parents participated did not predict better outcomes. And the data suggest the intervention is as effective for families facing extreme poverty and social risks as it is for families with less severe levels risks.

Researchers also looked at cumulative risk, analyzing families with multiple stressors and those with fewer, and they determined the Family Check-Up works equally well for both.

"What these families are doing is doing the work themselves," Dr. Shaw said. "They must be, given the small number of sessions. We don't believe things just happen overnight and are sustained. So, they are finding some kind of meaning in these changes – that it makes sense to praise my child five times for every time I yell at him or to know not to give a 15-minute time out to a 3-year-old. Little hints like that that are making their lives a little easier."



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