



Evaluations in Canadian child welfare programs: A critical review¹

Robert J. Flynn, Danielle Bouchard, and Jules Lajoie

Evaluating service effectiveness was recently identified as the most pressing priority for child welfare research in Canada.² This information sheet summarizes a 2005 systematic review by Robert Flynn and Danielle Bouchard, which evaluated studies of the effectiveness of various Canadian child welfare programs.³ Flynn and Bouchard analyzed 10 peer-reviewed evaluations of the impact of intervention programs, published between 1995–2005, four of which were based on randomized controlled trials, and six of which had non-randomized, quasi-experimental designs.

This information sheet provides a synopsis of each evaluation reviewed. Most synopses also provide an internet link to abstracts, and in some cases, complete texts, of the original articles. These links are available to readers with electronic access to the publication databases.

Randomized program impact evaluations

1) Prevention of recurrence of child physical abuse and neglect

MacMillan, H., Thomas, B.H., Jamieson, E., Walsh, C.A., et al. (2005). Effectiveness of home visitation by public-health nurses in prevention of the recurrence of child physical abuse and neglect: a randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet*, 365, 1786–1793. [View abstract of original article](#)

Considered by Flynn and Bouchard as the most rigorous impact evaluation of a Canadian child welfare program in the last decade, this study investigated the effectiveness of a nurse home-visitation program designed to prevent the recurrence of physical abuse or neglect in families in which either form of child maltreatment had

already occurred. MacMillan et al. concluded that the intensive two-year program of home visits by public health nurses was no more effective in preventing recurrence than standard follow-up services by caseworkers from the child protection agencies.

2) Prevention of child sexual abuse

Tutty, L.N. (1997). Child sexual abuse prevention programs: Evaluating Who Do You Tell. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 21, 869–881. [View abstract of original article](#)

Tutty evaluated a sexual abuse prevention program known as *Who Do You Tell*, designed for children of elementary-school age. An analysis of covariance between posttest and pretest scores showed that the children exposed to the program experienced a statistically significant, but modest, increase in knowledge of prevention concepts when compared with the wait-list children. Tutty interpreted this result as consistent with most well-controlled research on sexual-abuse prevention programs.

3) Prevention of dating abuse and violence

Wolfe, D.A., Wekerle, C., Scott, K., Straattman, A., Grasley, C., & Reitzel-Jaffee, D. (2003). Dating violence prevention with at-risk youth: A controlled outcome evaluation. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71, 279–291. [View abstract of original article](#)

This research evaluated a community-based program for adolescents aged 14 to 16 years who were seen as being at risk of developing abusive relationships with intimate partners because of their histories of maltreatment. As hypothesized, participants in the *Youth Relationships Project* intervention, compared

with those in the control group, were less physically and emotionally abusive toward their dating partners and exhibited a greater decline in symptoms of emotional distress.

4) Enhancement of parenting among maltreating mothers

Hughes, J.R., & Gottlieb, L.N. (2004). The effects of the Webster-Stratton parenting program on maltreating families: Fostering strengths. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 28, 1081–1097. [View abstract of original article](#)

The researchers investigated the effect of the Webster-Stratton (1989) parenting program⁴ on positive parenting strategies and child autonomy within maltreating families. The results showed that the mothers who took part in the program were significantly, but only modestly, more involved with their children than mothers in a control group. The program had no impact on the children's autonomy.

Non-randomized, quasi-experimental program impact evaluations

5) Prevention of child neglect in at-risk families

Ethier, L.S., Couture, G., Lacharité, C., & Gagnier, J.P. (2000). Impact of a multidimensional intervention programme applied to families at risk for child neglect. *Child Abuse Review*, 9, 19–36. [View abstract of original article](#)

This research evaluated the short-term effects of a multidimensional intervention program (the 18-month *Personal, Family, and Community Help Program*) designed to prevent child neglect. This experimental group was compared to a group of at-risk families receiving more conventional services in local community centres. Overall, the mothers from both groups showed, on average, equal increases in their social-network satisfaction, as well as equal decreases in their level of parental stress, depressive affect, and child abuse potential.

6) Group treatment of men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse

Tourigny, M., Guillot, M. & Morissette, P. (2005). Efficacité d'une intervention de groupe auprès d'hommes agressés sexuellement dans leur enfance. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 37, 97–107. [View abstract of original article](#)

The researchers evaluated the effects of a psycho-educational group intervention for men who had been victims of childhood sexual abuse. Although the authors interpreted the results as supportive of the

effectiveness of the intervention, Flynn and Bouchard note that the most parsimonious interpretation of the results would lead to the conclusion that the intervention had no significant effects.

7) Group treatment of adolescent girls who have experienced sexual abuse

Tourigny, M., Hébert, M., Daigneault, I., & Simoneau, A.C. (2005). Efficacy of a group therapy for sexually abused adolescent girls. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 14(4), 71–93. [View abstract of original article](#)

This study, which is related to the previous one, evaluated the effects of a treatment group for adolescent girls who had experienced sexual abuse. Overall, the authors established a plausible case for their conclusion, which was that group therapy produced some effects. However, if the conservative Bonferroni procedure had been applied to correct for the multiple statistical tests carried out, the number of such effects would have been smaller than claimed.

8) Group treatment of adult women survivors of childhood sexual abuse

Westbury, E., & Tutty, L.M. (1999). The efficacy of group treatment for survivors of childhood abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 31–44. [View abstract of original article](#)

The authors used a quasi-experimental pretest/posttest comparison group design to evaluate the effectiveness of a new group treatment for adult women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, comparing the outcomes for these women (who also received concurrent individual therapy) with those of women who received individual therapy alone. The groups were significantly different on only two of the seven adjusted outcome means, but even these two differences would not have survived the application of the conservative Bonferroni procedure. Thus, the most parsimonious interpretation of the findings would indicate that the group therapy had no additional impact.

9) Intensive family support to prevent out-of-home placements

Dagenais, C., Bastien, M., Bégin, J., Bouchard, C., Fortin, D., & Tourigny, M. (2003). Évaluation de l'implantation et des effets d'un programme de soutien intensif offert à des familles afin d'éviter un placement en milieu substitut. *Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme*, 18(2), 47–69. [View abstract of original article](#)

Two universities carried out an implementation evaluation, followed by a quasi-experimental impact evaluation, of PRIME, a program of intensive support offered to families thought to be at risk of

having one or more children placed in out-of-home care. PRIME was found to have been only partially implemented. Its effects were no better than those produced by regular services, since the program had drifted away from its original form towards a less intensive and more traditional service approach.

10) Mutual aid among parents in families served by child welfare

Cameron, G., & Birnie-Lefcovitch, S. (2000). Parent Mutual Aid Organizations in Child Welfare Demonstration Project: A report of outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22, 421–440.

This evaluation presented the outcomes for the *Parent Mutual Aid Organizations in Child Welfare Demonstration Project*. The project was seen as a promising and practical way of providing informal social support to parents in need, who are often socially isolated and stigmatized. It is not clear, however, that the project actually conferred any advantage in social support to its participants. Also, the use of overly liberal levels of statistical significance and a lack of control for the multiple statistical tests carried out meant that many assertions about the alleged benefits of the program are questionable.

Implications for future evaluation research

From their critical review of Canadian child welfare service evaluations, Flynn and Bouchard (2005) suggested that future research should:

- include more high-quality impact evaluations;
- evaluate the effectiveness of a wider range of interventions; and
- focus on evaluating interventions that incorporate the principles of evidence-based practice.

- 1 This information sheet is based on the following peer-reviewed journal article: Flynn, R.J. and Bouchard, D. (2005). Randomized and quasi-experimental evaluations of program impact in child welfare in Canada: A review. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 20(3), 65–100. ([View abstract of original article](#)). Portions of the article are referred to in this information sheet with permission from *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*.
- 2 Vandermeulen, G., Wekerle, C., & Ylagan, C. (2005). Introduction to the special issue on child welfare-research collaborations: Teamwork, research excellence, and credible, relevant results for practice. *Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) Journal*, 49(1), 2–3.
- 3 Flynn and Bouchard (2005). Randomized and quasi-experimental evaluations of program impact in child welfare in Canada: A review. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 20(3), 65–100.
- 4 Webster-Stratton, C. (1989). *Parents and children: A 10 program video-tape parent training series with manuals*. Eugene, OR: Castalia Press.

About the authors: Robert J. Flynn is Professor of Psychology, Director of the Centre for Research on Community Services, and Principal Scientist at the Institute of Population Health at the University of Ottawa. Danielle L. Bouchard is a full-time student in the Honours Bachelor of Arts program of the School of Psychology and a former research assistant at the Centre for Research on Community Services at the University of Ottawa. Jules Lajoie is the Communications Coordinator at the Centre for Research on Children and Families at McGill University.

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