



Parent training programs¹

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This information sheet describes the goals of parent training programs and examines what the research says about their effectiveness. In addition, it considers the extent to which parent training programs have been found to reduce the risk of child maltreatment.

What are the principles behind parent training programs?

Parent training programs, which are sometimes called parent education programs or parenting classes, provide skills, information and support. They are founded on two primary principles:

1. Parents play an important role in shaping their children's behaviour, and their use of effective child management strategies can reduce negative child behaviour. Teaching effective parenting skills can help parents shape positive child behaviours, manage child misbehaviour and promote healthy parent-child interactions.
2. Sharing information with parents about their children's cognitive, emotional and behavioural development can improve their understanding of the factors that influence child behaviour, increase their sensitivity to their children's needs, and help them develop realistic expectations for child behaviour.

Parent training programs are designed to meet a range of parenting needs. When implemented proactively, they can help parents manage "normal" developmental challenges effectively to prevent child behavioural concerns before they emerge. For parents of children who are showing behavioural concerns, these programs can help parents reduce problematic behaviours and prevent the negative personal and social

consequences the child may experience as a result of persistent behavioural difficulties. Parent training programs are frequently recommended for families involved with the child welfare systems, with the aim of strengthening parenting practices and addressing the negative parent-child interaction patterns that are associated with increased risk for child maltreatment.

What does parent training involve?

Parent training can take place in individual or group sessions and some programs include a self-directed option, with self-help manuals and structured tasks to guide learning (one example of this is the Positive Parenting Program or "Triple P"). Parent training programs also vary in their approach. Non-behavioural programs tend to focus on enhancing communication, parent responsiveness and understanding of children's developmental needs. Behaviourally oriented programs emphasize child management skills, although they frequently include other components. These programs emphasize "active learning" which provides parents with practice in real-life situations and feedback as they apply their new skills during the sessions and at home between sessions. In some programs, instructors visit participants at home in order to provide emotional support and to help parents apply and adapt the principles they learn in parent training to their unique home situations. Other programs facilitate use of community resources and informal networks to increase the supportive resources available to parents. Parent training programs may also include supplementary components that assist parents in managing challenges related to stress, anger management, mental health or substance abuse.

Are parent training programs effective?

Hundreds of evaluations of parenting programs have been published, including several meta-analyses.² Meta-analyses of parent training programs assess the extent to which parental participation is associated with improvements in child behaviour and changes in child-rearing behaviour, parenting attitudes and/or parent emotional well-being. When parent training is provided to parents involved with child welfare systems, researchers look at the extent to which these programs have an impact on maltreatment occurrence or recurrence or on measures of maltreatment risk.

Research indicates that parent training programs can be effective. For example, two meta-analyses of parent training programs to address child behavioural concerns found improvements in child-rearing behaviour (e.g., increased use of praise and reduced spanking) and parent perceptions (e.g., parenting attitudes, sense of competence) and reductions in problematic child behaviours following treatment.^{3,4} The improvements were small to medium in magnitude.

Similar findings have been documented for specific programs. Two meta-analyses of Behaviour Parent Training (BPT) programs found improvements in child externalizing (i.e., acting out) behaviour on parent and teacher ratings and when child behaviour was rated by an independent observer.^{5,6} Parents who completed BPT programs showed better emotional adjustment (e.g., less stress, depression, and irritability) than two-thirds of parents who received an alternative or no intervention.⁷ Improvements have also been documented for Parent Effectiveness Training (PET), a non-behavioural parent training program that focuses on child-rearing attitudes and communication patterns.⁸ Positive changes in child behaviour were not evident immediately after program completion but were evident on follow-up assessment.

A recent meta-analysis of the Positive Parenting Program (i.e., “Triple P”) found that whether delivered as individual treatment, or in a group or self-directed format, parents reported that their children showed less disruptive behaviour following participation.⁹ These changes in disruptive behaviour were significantly greater than those reported by parents who received no intervention or an alternative intervention. In all three delivery formats, parents also reported changes in parenting practices, parent-child interactions and/or parent well-being.

A comparison of randomized controlled trials of Triple P and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) found that both programs had positive effects, although some delivery formats were less beneficial than others.¹⁰ When parents were asked about their parenting practices, parents who received parent training were more likely than parents in the comparison group to report reductions in negative child-rearing behaviours. Parents’ reports were corroborated by external observers who watched parents interact with their children. The children of parents who completed these programs also showed fewer acting-out behaviours than the children of parents in the comparison group, who received no intervention or other types of intervention.

Individual studies have also documented improved outcomes with a variety of other parenting programs including Project 12-Ways,¹¹ The Incredible Years,¹² SafeCare¹³ and Parent Management Training.¹⁴

How long do these effects last?

Relatively few studies incorporate long-term follow-up. In general, meta-analyses indicate that improvements are evident up to one year after program completion^{15,16,17} but gains seem to be largest when the parenting program has just ended, and decrease over time.^{18,19,20} Improvements in child-rearing attitudes may be more long-lasting than changes in parenting behaviour.²¹

What features make parent training programs more effective?

Research suggests that some parent training programs are more effective than others. One meta-analysis²² found greater improvements in both parent and child outcomes when parents had the chance to practice with their own children and when the programs had components to enhance positive parent-child interactions. Positive parenting behaviour was also enhanced when programs included components designed to improve emotional communication between parent and child (e.g., increased active listening, reduced negative communication). Teaching parents to use “time-outs” (time-outs involve isolating children for a short time after misbehaviour as a discipline tool) and to respond consistently to child behaviour was associated with greater reductions in externalizing (acting-out) behaviour in children.

Are there circumstances in which parent training is less effective?

A number of studies show that the benefits of parent training programs may be reduced if parents are living in situations of adversity or disadvantage. Socioeconomically disadvantaged parents show less improvement following parent training than parents without those challenges.^{23,24,25,26} Although results are mixed, other studies also suggest that single parent status, maternal depression, young parent age, marital discord, poor social support and unstable housing may reduce the benefits of parent training programs.²⁷

In response to these studies, some parent training programs have been enhanced to address factors that can influence parenting, family well-being and parental response to parent training interventions. So far, the evidence does not show that these enhancements have a positive effect on parenting skills. Some studies find no additional benefit with enhanced programs compared to standard programs.²⁸ Other studies suggest that augmenting parent training with ancillary components such as job skills training, stress management²⁹ or other social/concrete supports³⁰ is associated with smaller improvements in parent and child outcomes than programs without these features. One explanation for these findings is that the additional components designed to increase the parents' ability to find jobs or lessen stress may divert attention from the acquisition of parenting skills. It is also possible that programs that incorporate these ancillary services are designed to target families facing additional challenges. Co-occurring family challenges may adversely affect parents' attendance as well as their ability to complete the programs and implement the recommendations of their parenting educators. However, Lundahl, Risser & Lovejoy³¹ found that socio-economically disadvantaged families showed greater behavioural improvement when programs were individually delivered rather than offered in a group format. These findings underscore the need for additional research to identify the conditions under which particular parent training programs are likely to be effective.

Do parent training programs decrease child maltreatment risk?

The court systems often recommend, and in some cases order, parents to participate in parent training to address deficits in child-rearing skills and knowledge, in order to preserve or reunify families.

Barth and colleagues³² estimated that more than 800,000 families in the United States were referred by child welfare agencies to parenting programs each year. The meta-analyses described above show that parent training may produce positive changes in parent and child behaviour. To the extent that these changes are sustained over time, they promote and support healthy parent-child relationships and child development. However, these studies do not provide direct evidence that parent training programs reduce the risk for child maltreatment.

The ability to generalize findings from these studies to families involved with child welfare is limited by at least two factors:

- 1) Many studies of the effectiveness of parent training programs are based on samples of parents from community or clinic settings who are seeking assistance to improve child-rearing practices or manage child behavioural problems. Some families who have come into contact with child welfare, however, take parent training programs in response to external factors such as court orders, rather than their own perceived need for change. This may decrease their engagement in the programs and the potential benefits may be reduced as a result.
- 2) Parents from community and clinic samples may not have experienced the level of adversity or disadvantage frequently documented among parents involved with child welfare. Families involved with child welfare tend to have higher rates of disadvantage and are more likely to be dealing with domestic violence, mental health and/or substance abuse problems.³³ These additional life challenges have been associated with more modest program outcomes.

To support evidence-based child welfare practice, the effectiveness of parent training programs needs to be demonstrated for parents who are involved with child welfare systems. So far, the evidence is weak. Two meta-analyses indicate that participation in parent training can improve child-rearing behaviour and attitudes among parents referred by child welfare workers. MacLeod and Nelson³⁴ conducted a meta-analysis of 56 studies of programs implemented to prevent child maltreatment. Five outcomes were examined: out-of-home placements, maltreatment, parenting attitudes, parenting behaviour and home environment (e.g., in areas such as stimulation and mother-child interaction). Across studies, small to moderate improvements in parenting attitudes, out-of-home placement and assessments of the home environment were evident

at the end of the program and at follow-up. Only small improvements were noted in parenting behaviour and on maltreatment outcomes but these effects were sustained over time and increased slightly over the follow-up period. These effects are considered promising, however few studies in the meta-analysis examined maltreatment outcomes.

More recently, a meta-analysis was done³⁵ of 23 studies of parent training programs for parents who were at risk for child maltreatment or who had already maltreated a child. Across studies, a range of child-rearing attitudes was examined, including beliefs about the value of harsh punishment, children's level of responsibility and parents' perceptions of children's needs and/or developmental competencies. Immediately following training, parents showed more positive child rearing attitudes and enhanced emotional well-being. Changes in their parenting behaviours were also noted. Their use of coercive strategies, physical force or threats declined and their use of non-coercive strategies such as democratic reasoning, the use of praise and expressions of warmth increased. When the program was over, parents maintained positive changes in child-rearing attitudes but improvements in parents' emotional well-being and child-rearing practices decreased approximately 40% toward pre-treatment levels. Only three studies examined subsequent child maltreatment, and one found no difference between program participants and the comparison group in maltreatment reports or maltreatment potential.

Summary

Meta-analyses indicate that a variety of parent training programs can improve child behavioural management and foster positive parent-child interactions, and that some of these improvements are sustained up to one year following program participation. From a public health perspective, the research suggests that these programs have the potential to improve child well-being and reduce the personal and social costs associated with the development of severe behavioural disturbances. When the objective is to prevent maltreatment, the impact of parent training programs is less clear. Child welfare services frequently refer parents at risk for maltreatment to parenting programs, with the assumption that improvements in child management and parenting practices will reduce the risk for maltreatment. Although parents at risk for maltreatment show improvements in child-rearing behaviours and attitudes following parent training

programs, relatively few studies have examined the impact of these programs on child maltreatment or maltreatment risk. Additional research is necessary to assess the impact of parent training programs on maltreatment risk and to identify the families most likely to benefit from these programs.

- 1 This information sheet was reviewed by experts in the field of child welfare.
- 2 Meta-analyses are studies that synthesize the results of numerous studies and look for patterns of findings across studies. They also examine the magnitude of improvements (i.e., effect size) and may identify the factors associated with better outcomes.
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