



A closer look at the effectiveness of early childhood education in at-risk families



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Abstract

Various reviews and meta-analyses provide heterogeneous but predominantly positive assessments of programs for early child care and education. Against this background, the crucial point is whether and under what conditions a program exhibits effects in a certain target group. This question is examined in the present article at the example of the program Parents as Teachers (PAT) in at-risk families. Based on five systematically selected studies, the analyses show that PAT is effective with weak to medium effect sizes and that only implementations in accordance with the program's manual will demonstrate effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

According to the results of international comparisons of educational attainment, such as PISA, schools are still contending with the problem that educational success is largely a matter of social origin (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010; OECD, 2010). For this reason, numerous OECD countries fall back on programs for early child care and education (ECCE) that systematically target at-risk populations as defined by social, economic, cultural or psychological criteria (Eurydice, 2009). Psychosocial risks, such as parents' low educational attainment, poverty, social isolation or parents' mental illness, can restrict family interactions in a way that the child lacks the basic social and cognitive stimulation required for optimum development and educational success (Belsky, 2008; Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000; Lemelin, Tarabulsky, & Provost, 2006; Sirin, 2005; Sroufe, Coffino, & Carlson, 2010). Accordingly, such programs aim to further the cognitive, verbal, social, emotional, and motor skills at a pre-school age. The idea is to avert difficulties with learning and development, to enhance educational opportunities in the long term and to improve social integration in the subsequent phases of life.

To assess the sustainable benefit of these ECCE programs regarding the circumstances and development of families and children, empirical proof is required in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Particularly in English-speaking countries, there is a great deal of experience in practice and research in this field, which is well documented by the many reviews and several meta-analyses on the effectiveness of ECCE. This research has shown heterogeneous results, but the majority of recent ECCE programs have had considerable positive short-term effects and somewhat smaller long-term effects on development, with children from disadvantaged families making progress similar to or better than their more advantaged peers (Anderson et al., 2003; Barnett, 1998; Burger, 2010; Gomby, 2005; Melhuish, 2004; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008; Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

In the German-speaking countries that are particularly seriously affected by origin-related disparities, recent years also have witnessed the launch of several ECCE projects within the framework of early support that are now well into the establishment and consolidation phases (Cierpka, Stasch, & Gross, 2007; Renner & Heimeshoff, 2011; Ziegenhain & Künster, 2012; Stamm et al., 2009). In many places concomitant research has not yet been completed, but initial results show mostly encouraging effects of early intervention services for families at-risk (Ayerle, 2012; Böllert, Buschhorn, & Karic, 2012; Bovenschen et al., 2012; Buschhorn, 2012; Diez Grieser & Simoni, 2011;

Renner, 2012; Sidor, Kunz, Eickhorst, & Cierpka, 2013; Tschumper et al., 2012; Ziert, Kurtz, & Jungmann, 2010).

Besides this generally positive assessment of empirical findings, a closer look at the program effects reveal that they vary widely across program goals, program models, different sites implementing the same model, and even families within a single site (Gomby, 2005; Bull, McCormick, Swann, & Mulvihill, 2004). Against this background the issue is whether and under what conditions a specific concept of intervention is effective in a certain target group—for example, to improve policy and practice recommendations for parenting interventions. This question is examined in the present article at the example of the home visitation program Parents as Teachers (PAT) in at-risk families. PAT is a widespread, state-furthered program for home visitation in the US (Avellar, Paulsell, Sama-Miller, & Del Grosso, 2012) and is currently applied in German-speaking countries (www.pat-mittelternlernen.org) and in Great Britain (www.parentsasfirstteachers.org.uk). Effectiveness in at-risk families has not as yet been systematically reviewed, despite the fact that under-privileged families feature in the PAT target group. To close this gap the following issues are center-stage: (1) to what extent is the PAT program effective for at-risk families? (2) How do the conditions of implementation relate to program outcomes? (3) What type of further research is required? To address these questions, the state of research on the effectiveness of PAT in at-risk families is reviewed by way of systematically selected studies. Particular attention will be paid to features of structural and process quality and their role in explaining the effectiveness of PAT. Finally, conclusions will be drawn for further research on PAT in at-risk families.

2. Review object: The PAT program

PAT is an educational home visitation program for parents developed in the 1970s in the American state of Missouri when educators observed that children were beginning kindergarten with different levels of school readiness. In the following the focus is put on central factors of concept quality (Jungmann & Brand, 2012) such as target group, intervention aims, theory of change, core components, and manual based on the PAT Foundational Curriculum (PATNC, 2011b) and the model implementation guide (PATNC, 2011a).

PAT is designed to serve families *from pregnancy to age 3*, with additional curricular materials to meet the needs of parents of children aged 3 to 5 years. The program can be *universally applied* and is also suited to *at-risk families*. PAT aims to strengthen the learning location “family” to (1) boost parents' understanding of early childhood development and improve their parenting skills; (2) detect retarded development and health problems at an early

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