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Social support and child protection: Lessons learned and learning



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ABSTRACT

Social support has been a topic of research for nearly 50 years, and its applications to prevention and intervention have grown significantly, including programs advancing child protection. This article summarizes the central conclusions of the 1994 review of research on social support and the prevention of child maltreatment prepared for the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, and surveys advances in the field since its publication. Among the lessons learned twenty years ago are (a) the diversity of the social support needs of at-risk families and their association with child endangerment, (b) the need to supplement the emotionally affirmative aspects of social support with efforts to socialize parenting practices and monitor child well-being, (c) the desirability of integrating formal and informal sources of social support for recipients, and (d) the importance of considering the complex recipient reactions to receiving support from others. The lessons we are now learning derive from research exploring the potential of online communication to enhance social support, the neurobiology of stress and its buffering through social support, and the lessons of evaluation research that are identifying the effective ingredients of social support interventions.

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The benefits of social support to psychological well-being are self-evident in everyday experience. Whether from family, friends and neighbors, coworkers, counselors, teachers, coaches, or therapists, people of all ages face life challenges more successfully with the support of others, and this conclusion is confirmed by extensive empirical research (Taylor, 2011). By contrast, social isolation is associated with poorer psychological functioning for many reasons. Adults who are at significant risk of child maltreatment have been found to be socially isolated, for example, which leaves them with few buffers on life stress, little socialization of healthy parenting practices, and few people to call on when needed (Limber & Hashima, 2002). The benefits of social support and the association of social isolation with psychological difficulty lead to a question that has compelled considerable research inquiry for several decades. *Can the benefits of naturally-occurring social support be created for individuals who lack them to promote child protection?*

An affirmative answer to this question requires understanding several related issues. What is the nature of the social isolation experienced by potentially abusive or neglectful adults, and how is it related to risk of child maltreatment? What are the characteristics of social support that buffer against these risks? Which people are most capable of providing social support to such individuals? What are the barriers to creating social support when it does not naturally exist, and how can they be overcome? Is social support alone effective, or must it be complemented by other resources to ensure its benefits

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or address other needs? These are challenging questions, and although they do not undermine the hope that social support can contribute to the prevention of child maltreatment, they are important considerations for the design of interventions that try to accomplish this goal.

As part of its development of a “neighbors helping neighbors” national strategy for child protection, the [U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect \(1993\)](#) commissioned a series of papers relevant to this task ([Melton & Barry, 1994](#)). One of the commissioned papers, subsequently expanded into a book, focused on social support and the prevention of child maltreatment ([Thompson, 1994, 1995](#)). At the time it was written, research on social support as a stress buffer and preventive factor had been expanding since the mid-1970s. By 1994, however, the arc of professional enthusiasm for social support interventions had passed from an early phase of unrestrained enthusiasm to a later, more realistic awareness of the challenges of creating effective interventions for at-risk families. Research on social support and its consequences has been more refined since the review was written, and has included studies of the use of online communication for strengthening social support and its benefits, and research on the neurobiological mechanisms involved in the social buffering of stress. At the same time, there has been an expansion in the sophistication of intervention programs enlisting social support, and evaluations of their effectiveness have provided further insight into the processes by which social support is given and received.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the conclusions of the initial analysis and indicate how research has proceeded since it was written. Implications for practice and policy are also outlined. Although the conclusions derived from the research 20 years ago remain true today, they have been deepened and refined by subsequent research and by the yield of carefully designed evaluations of intervention studies. Taken together, they confirm that creating effective social support interventions for child protection is challenging but worthwhile, and it is beginning to be accomplished.

Social support and child protection: lessons we have learned

In the 1994 report, the goal was to inform the U.S. Advisory Board concerning the design of social support interventions for socially isolated at-risk parents that would accomplish child protection goals. The questions listed above provided an implicit framework for this analysis and its implications for practice and policy. The following is a summary of those lessons learned (relevant research references can be found in [Thompson, 1994, 1995](#)).

Social isolation and risk for child maltreatment

What is the nature of the social isolation experienced by potentially abusive or neglectful adults, and how is it related to the risk of child maltreatment? The paradigmatic view is that such adults lack significant social connections to others in the extended family, neighborhood, and community, and consequently have little support to buffer stress, promote healthy behavior, and socialize parenting practices in a manner that would curb abusive conduct. Research on the social networks of parents who maltreat their children or are at considerable risk of doing so has confirmed many aspects of this portrayal. These parents tend to have smaller social networks, for example, and to see network members less frequently than do other people.

Beyond this, however, there is surprising diversity in the social networks and social support available to at-risk parents. Although some feel isolated in neighborhoods that they describe as lacking the resources that support families, others are embedded in kin or neighborhood networks that afford considerable affirmation and mutual assistance. Moreover, when parents feel socially isolated, it can be for different reasons. In some cases, it derives from longstanding character disorders, exacerbated by distrust of others, that contributes to their social marginality and which may repel family or neighbors. In other cases, it derives from deliberate efforts to avoid detection of dysfunctional family or personal practices, which may include substance abuse and domestic violence as well as child maltreatment. In other instances, at-risk families may be so exhausted by their financial and personal difficulties that they do not extend the time and energy to make contacts with others in their social networks, even if they desire greater social contact. Indeed, their network associates may also be drained by the same stressors and have little capacity for providing social support. The heterogeneity of the causes of child abuse and neglect make diversity in the social networks of at-risk parents inevitable, and suggests that “one size fits all” is not likely a suitable approach to designing social support interventions for child protection purposes.

A compelling illustration of the limitations of the paradigmatic portrayal of social isolation and child maltreatment comes from [Korbin's \(1989\)](#) interviews with mothers convicted of fatal child abuse. By their account, these mothers were surrounded by family, friends, and neighbors who were often painfully aware of the bruises, neglect, and other harms inflicted by the mothers on their offspring. But in their efforts to be emotionally supportive, these people failed to challenge harmful practices and instead overlooked signs of parental dysfunction, minimized the seriousness of abuse, and offered reassurance about the mothers' good intentions while providing noncritical emotional affirmation. Korbin's findings suggest that social support must accomplish more than providing emotional affirmation and acceptance to promote child protection. A similar conclusion derives from a recent study by [Freisthler, Holmes, and Wolf \(in press\)](#), who indicated that parents who experienced a high sense of belonging with others were more likely to report physically abusing their children, especially when companionship involved drinking together outside the home. Their findings are consistent with studies of social support in members of deviant social networks, such as adolescent delinquents or criminal gangs, in which social integration supports deviant behavior. This “dark side of social support” suggests that the association of social integration or isolation

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