



## Outcome evaluation of a community center-based program for mothers at high psychosocial risk<sup>☆</sup>

María José Rodrigo<sup>a,\*</sup>, María Luisa Máiquez<sup>a</sup>, Ana Delia Correa<sup>b</sup>,  
Juan Carlos Martín<sup>c</sup>, Guacimara Rodríguez<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Departamento de Psicología Evolutiva y de la Educación, Universidad de La Laguna,  
Campus de Guajara, Tenerife 38205, Spain*

<sup>b</sup> *Departamento de Didáctica e Investigación Educativa, Universidad de La Laguna,  
Campus de Guajara, Tenerife, Spain*

<sup>c</sup> *Fundación ECCA, Las Palmas, Spain*

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study reported the outcome evaluation of the “Apoyo Personal y Familiar” (APF) program for poorly-educated mothers from multi-problem families, showing inadequate behavior with their children. APF is a community-based multi-site program delivered through weekly group meetings in municipal resource centers.

**Method:** A total of 340 mothers referred by the municipal social services of Tenerife, Spain were assessed; 185 mothers participated in the APF program that lasted 8 months, and 155 mothers were in the control group. Pre-post test comparisons for the intervention group and post-test comparisons with the control group on self-rating measures of maternal beliefs, personal agency and child-rearing practices were performed. Multivariate tests, *t* tests and effect sizes (ES) were calculated to determine the program effectiveness on the outcome measures.

**Results:** Mothers’ support of nurturist and nativist beliefs and the reported use of Neglect-permissive and Coercive practices significantly decreased after program completion whereas the reported use of Inductive practices significantly increased. Increases in self-efficacy, internal control and role difficulty were also significant in relation to those of the control group. The program was especially effective for older mothers, with fewer children, living in a two-parent family, in urban areas and with either low or medium educational levels.

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\* Corresponding author.

**Conclusion:** The program was very effective in changing the mothers' perceived competences and modestly effective in changing their beliefs about child development and education and reported child-rearing practices. Changes in personal agency are very important for at-risk parents who feel helpless and with no control over their lives.

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*Keywords:* Prevention in at-risk parents; Group intervention; Community-based intervention; Outcome evaluation

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## Introduction

In 1997, the Autonomous Government of the Canary Islands, Spain, approved the Law of Integral Assistance for the Minor and their Families (Ley 1/97 de Atención Integral a los Menores y las Familias). Since then, Child Protection Services advocate the development of programs for preventing unnecessary foster care placement of children from maltreating families or those at-risk of maltreatment. The programs are conceived as community-based proactive interventions delivered by the municipal social services to provide the most focused and longest possible service, which should be offered as close as possible to the home environment. Social services personnel in each municipality (e.g., psychologists, social workers) are responsible for selecting families at psycho-social risk. The typical profile includes low-income parents who have poor models of parenting, lack personal empowerment, have inadequate life management skills, show inconsistent and unresponsive parenting, are punitive in managing children's behavior or provide inadequate supervision of children and neglect of their basic needs.

The purpose of this article is to present the results of the community-based program "Apoyo Personal y Familiar" or APF (Personal and Family Support program) targeted at parents from such at-risk populations who were recruited in several municipalities of the island of Tenerife. Self-rating measures of maternal beliefs, personal agency and child-rearing practices were performed to evaluate program effects using a quasi-experimental design. The design, implementation and evaluation of the APF program was made possible by a formal agreement reached among four institutions: The University of La Laguna, the Insular Government of Tenerife, 26 municipalities of the island and a non-profit Foundation for Adult Education (ECCA). A comparison of our approach with other prevention programs of child maltreatment is presented below.

### *Prevention efforts: home versus center-based services*

APF shares with most of family support and family preservation programs an empowerment and strengths-based focus on promoting parental competencies, which is critical for vulnerable families often dependent on welfare (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 1996). However, APF is a center-based instead of a home-based service. Home visitation offers the possibility to tailor a specific curriculum to the troubled, disorganized families in a less threatening environment while providing an opportunity to accept social support from the community agencies (Daro & Donnelly, 2002; Gray, Spurway, & McClatchey, 2001). Some program evaluations have found that parents are less likely to remain on welfare, less likely to engage in serious abuse or neglect and more likely to report positive parent-child interactions after home visiting programs (e.g., the "Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters," Baker, Piotrkowski, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; "Prenatal/Early Infancy Project," Olds et al., 1999; "Parents as Teachers," Wagner & Clayton, 1999).

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