Feasibility, acceptability, and effects of a peer support group to prevent child maltreatment among parents experiencing homelessness

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ABSTRACT

Parents and children experiencing an episode of homelessness face a variety of adverse factors that can increase their risk of difficult relationships and even child maltreatment. Parent support programs have been suggested as one way to strengthen parent-child relationships and decrease risk of child maltreatment for this vulnerable population, but such programs have not been rigorously evaluated. This study was designed to investigate if Circle of Parents, a self-help support group developed to decrease child maltreatment, was a feasible, acceptable, and effective intervention for parents residing in shelters ($N = 80$). The investigation utilized a quasi-experimental design using propensity score analysis with a services-as-usual comparison group. The Protective Factors Survey (PFS) and a client satisfaction questionnaire served as the primary outcome measures and group facilitators provided information about feasibility of the intervention within shelters. Promising evidence was found for the acceptability and feasibility of Circle of Parents. However, analyses of PFS data showed little difference between the intervention and services-as-usual comparison groups. Overall, findings pointed to emerging positive findings but underscored the need for continued controlled examination of the effectiveness of Circle of Parents implemented in shelters and transitional housing.

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Based on 2012–2013 data from the U.S. Department of Education and the 2013 U.S. Census data, it is estimated that 1 in 30 American children annually will experience homelessness (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014). Although there are vast individual differences among children who face homelessness, and many demonstrate resilient functioning (Masten, 2011), research indicates that these children show higher rates of adjustment problems compared to housed children in poverty. Specifically, children who are homeless tend to show difficulties in academic achievement (Cutuli et al., 2013; Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010), developmental delays (Haskett, Armstrong, & Tisdale, 2015), and mental health challenges (Park, Fertig, & Allison, 2010; Park, Metraux, Culhane, & Mandell, 2012). Given their elevated risk for adjustment problems, efforts to enhance protective factors for children who experience homelessness should be pursued. Decades of research in prevention science show the protective influence of positive parenting on young children who face adverse experiences (Grant et al., 2006;

Sandler, Ingram, Wolchik, Tein, & Winslow, 2015; Shonkoff, 2011). In a similar way, safe, stable, nurturing parent-child relationships might also buffer children from the potential negative impact of homelessness (Burns et al., 2013; Gewirtz, DeGarmo, Plowman, August, & Realmuto, 2009; Miliotis, Sesma, & Masten, 1999).

Unfortunately, many parents who experience homelessness are confronted by economic, health, and social challenges known to place parents at risk for abuse and neglect of their children. Almost all parents who experience homelessness have lived in poverty prior to transitioning into shelter housing (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). They report disproportionately high rates of depression (Bassuk & Beardslee, 2014), exposure to domestic violence, loss of relationships, and separation from family members (David, Gelberg, & Suchman, 2012; Vostanis, Tischler, Cumella, & Bellerby, 2001). Many were victims of maltreatment in their own early years (Bassuk, Weinreb, Buckner, Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1996). These experiences can have a deleterious impact on the quality of parenting and parent-child relationships. Indeed, compared to housed children, children experiencing homelessness are more likely to be involved with child protective services, have higher rates of substantiated maltreatment (Park, Metraux, Broadbar, & Culhane, 2004; Perlman, Fantuzzo, & 113, 2013; Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010), and are more likely to be placed in foster care (Culhane, Webb,

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Grimm, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003). Homeless children are an extremely vulnerable population due to this dual burden of chronic poverty and strained parent-child relationships.

1. Parenting interventions for homeless families

To strengthen parent-child relationships, enhance positive parenting practices, and promote well-being of children without homes, parenting support in shelters and transitional housing programs has been recommended (Bassuk et al., 2014; Park et al., 2012). A recent survey of housing providers across the U.S. showed that parenting support was considered an important component of comprehensive family services (Bassuk, DeCandia, & Richard, 2015). Yet, there has been limited research on the effects of parenting interventions implemented in housing programs. Lack of research in this setting is partially attributable to the numerous barriers to delivering interventions in housing programs. These barriers include limited space for group meetings, lack of privacy for individual parent support, high staff turnover which can interrupt services and interagency agreements, a focus on basic needs over parenting support, and highly-structured programs that restrict available time to participate in parenting services (Gewirtz & Taylor, 2009; Friedman, 2000; Stephens, McDonald, & Jouriles, 2000). These challenges can impact the feasibility of implementing parenting programs in shelters and transitional housing (Stephens et al., 2000).

Haskett, Loehman, and Burkhart (2014) reviewed the literature on parenting interventions delivered to parents during an episode of homelessness and found only 12 investigations, including peer-reviewed publications and other outlets (e.g., book chapters, dissertations). The majority of studies were characterized by serious methodological limitations, most notably lack of a comparison group. On a positive note, the studies suggested that the interventions were feasible in a shelter setting and there was some evidence of positive effects in terms of increased knowledge about parenting and child development (of course, change in knowledge does not necessarily translate to change in behavior). The authors concluded that the research base for parenting interventions in shelter settings was insufficient to adequately inform practice. They encouraged controlled studies of manualized evidence-based interventions and inclusion of sample sizes sufficient to examine moderators of outcomes.

2. Maltreatment prevention through peer support programs

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the feasibility, acceptability, and impact of Circle of Parents provided to parents in shelters. The mission of Circle of Parents is to prevent child abuse and neglect and strengthen families through mutual self-help parent support groups. Goals of Circle of Parents are to help parents (a) create and enhance their social connections (b) improve communication and problem-solving skills (c) gain knowledge of parenting and child development, and (d) access concrete support by linking them to resources throughout the community and within the group.

In the early 2000s, through collaborations of the National Family Support Roundtable and Prevent Child Abuse America, the Circle of Parents model grew out of a national initiative to develop and disseminate self-help family support programs (Falconer, Haskett, McDaniels, Dirkes, & Siegel, 2008). With multi-year federal funding, at least 20 state non-profit organizations and a national network of Circle of Parents groups were formed.

Circle of Parents groups are offered weekly and are led by parents with support of a facilitator trained in achieving the goals of the program. The trained facilitator receives technical assistance and implementation support from the state program and national network. Resources include a facilitator manual, children's manual, and parent handbook. Parents in the group are encouraged to take ownership of the agenda, topics, and format of the Circle of Parents meetings. Therefore, each individual group's goals and content will vary depending on

the parent composition. The role of the facilitator is to organize meetings, support the group process, foster trust and mutual aid, but not to deliver advice or prescribed information (Gay, 2005).

Circle of Parents was selected as the intervention strategy to meet the unique needs of parents in housing programs for a number of reasons. First, many parents who experience homelessness have a diminished social support network and lack access to concrete and continuous support (Letiecq, Anderson, & Koblinsky, 1998). Holtrop, Chaviano, Scott, and McNeil Smith (2015) conducted interviews with parents residing in transitional housing to determine their preferred components and delivery methods for parenting interventions. In those interviews, parents conveyed the importance of feeling supported in their parenting efforts, primarily by receiving support from other parents in the same situation. Learning from other parents and sharing their own parenting strategies was also important. Second, because research indicates that many parents who experience homelessness have faced violence and extreme stress (Browne, 1993; Jasinski, Wesely, Mustaine, & Wright, 2005), trauma-informed practices are considered best practice for unstably housed individuals (Guarino, 2014). A trauma-informed approach places high value on practices that empower parents and are non-violent, and these are core principles of Circle of Parents. Finally, Circle of Parents is relatively inexpensive to offer. Cost is an important factor for the sustainability of services in low-resourced housing programs.

Although studies of Circle of Parents are limited, research on child abuse prevention programs that focus on enhancing sources of support tend to show positive results. In a longitudinal study of 1200 low-income mothers who participated in a comprehensive parenting program for six months, every unit increase in social support resulted in a 25% reduced risk of substantiated child abuse (Lawson, Alameda-Lawson, & Byrnes, 2012). In an early study of Parents Anonymous, a self-help support group similar to Circle of Parents, parents who attended a greater number of sessions reported more frequent social contacts, increased social support, and enhanced feelings of self-confidence compared to those who attended fewer sessions (Lieber & Baker, 1977). Two additional studies of Parents Anonymous indicated some positive effects (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2007; Post-Kammer, 1988). However, none of these studies included control groups, so the promising findings must be interpreted with caution.

3. Prior research on Circle of Parents

Circle of Parents is listed on the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for child welfare but there is insufficient research to provide a scientific rating. Indeed, there have been very few evaluations of Circle of Parents. Using a retrospective pre-post design, researchers evaluated outcomes as a result of program participation for over 900 parents across four states (Falconer et al., 2008). Parents completed a survey regarding their current functioning and their perceived functioning at the start of group attendance. This practical design was used because it allowed the researcher to obtain data from all participants available at a single group session, regardless of when the participant started the ongoing group. Parents reported using more positive parenting practices, experienced improved parent-child relationships, and increased their social networks and use of community resources compared to before participation in Circle of Parents. In two states, higher frequency of attendance at group sessions was associated with greater improvement in several areas of functioning. However, number of sessions attended was not a moderator of effects in other states (Falconer et al., 2008). Program satisfaction ratings were consistently high across all sites. Overall, findings provided support for the positive effects of Circle of Parents, although confidence in findings was limited by the relatively weak research design.

In an unpublished dissertation, Hart (2007) also used a retrospective pre-post design to examine effects of Circle of Parents for 187 caregivers who attended one of 19 Circle of Parents groups in North Carolina.