



## Feasibility of Internet-based parent training for low-income parents of young children

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### ABSTRACT

Parent training programs promote positive parenting and benefit low-income children, but are rarely used. Internet-based delivery may help expand the reach of parent training programs, although feasibility among low-income populations is still unclear. We examined the feasibility of Internet-based parent training, in terms of Internet access/use and engagement, through two studies. In Study 1, 160 parents recruited from Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) centers completed a brief paper survey regarding Internet access and use (all parents received government aid). We found high levels of access, openness, and comfort with the Internet and Internet-enabled devices. In Study 2, a pilot study, we assessed use of an online parenting program in a project with a sample of 89 predominately low-income parents (75% received government aid). Parents learned about a new, online parenting program (the “5-a-Day Parenting Program”) and provided ratings of level of interest and program use 2-weeks and 4-weeks later. Local website traffic was also monitored. At baseline, parents were very interested in using the web-based program, and the majority of parents (69.6%) reported visiting the website at least once. However, in-depth use was rare (only 9% of parents reported frequent use of the online program). Results support the feasibility of Internet-based parent training for low-income parents, as most parent were able to use the program and were interested in doing so. However, results also suggest the need to develop strategies to promote in-depth program use.

### 1. Introduction

It is critical that research-informed programs and interventions reach the populations which they are designed to benefit. This is particularly true of young, low-income children, who are at increased risk for a host of negative outcomes including behavior problems (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) and deficits in school-readiness skills (Baker, Cameron, Rimm-Kaufman, & Grissmer, 2012; Kaiser, Hancock, Cai, Foster, & Hester, 2000; Raz & Bryant, 1990). Positive parenting mitigates risk for low-income children (Lugo-Gil & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008), and a number of parent training programs have demonstrated efficacy with this population (e.g., Gross et al., 2003). However, only a small minority of the parents of at-risk children ever receive such an intervention (see McGoron & Ondersma, 2015, for a review). Specially, uptake and retention in parenting programs is low in general, particularly among low-income parents (e.g., Garvey, Julion, Fogg, Kratovil, & Gross, 2006), with factors such as lack of time and scheduling conflicts being salient barriers to program engagement (Spoth & Redmond, 2000). Unique approaches to connect low-income parents with research-

informed parent training programs are clearly needed.

Internet-delivered programs are one possible path for expanding intervention reach. For example, Baker, Sanders, and Morawska (2017) report that most Australian parents (65%) already use the Internet to obtain parenting information. Additionally, results demonstrating the efficacy of Internet-delivered interventions for a variety of populations are accumulating (e.g., anxiety and depression [Andrews, Cuijpers, Craske, McEvoy, & Titov, 2010] and substance use [Rooke, Thorsteinsson, Karpin, Copeland, & Allsop, 2010]). Internet-based parent training programs are also showing positive results in efficacy trials (see McGoron & Ondersma, 2015, and Breitenstein, Gross, & Christophersen, 2014, for reviews).

Two programs in particular are worth highlighting: the 8-session Triple P online program (Sanders, Baker, & Turner, 2012) and the 7-session Internet-based Parent Management Training (Enebrink, Högström, Forster, & Ghaderi, 2012). In the Sanders et al. (2012), 116 Australian parents of children, ages 2–9, with disruptive behavior problems participated. Although parents' income was not reported, the sample was low risk as 90% of parents were married, over half had a

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university degree, and only 13% reported worrying about food running out before they could afford to buy more. Eighty percent of participating parents reported using the Internet daily and 81% reported feeling very confident using a computer. In the Enebrink et al. (2012), 104 Swedish parents of children with clinical-level behavior problems participated. Children were, on average, over 6 years old and the majority of parents completed a university degree. Evaluations of both programs showed that parents reported reduced child behavior problems and reduced dysfunctional parenting at follow-up. However, given that these were low-risk families with clinical level child behavior problems in Australia and Sweden and parents sought to participate after learning about the project through community postings (i.e., a reactive recruitment approach), it is not clear if this approach would be effective with low-income parents in the United States with a program for the general population (i.e., not clinical-level problems; not treatment seeking). Online approaches to parent training programs could fall well short of their goal if they are not helpful for low-income populations. Determining that this approach is feasible for this population is a necessary first step.

### 1.1. The feasibility of Internet-based parent training for low-income parents

Several conditions must be met in order to establish the feasibility of Internet-based parent training programs for low-income families. First, low-income parents must have regular access to an Internet-enabled device (i.e., Smartphone, tablet, or computer), ideally via ownership of such a device. Second, low-income parents must be comfortable using Internet-enabled devices and obtaining information from the Internet. If parents are uncomfortable using Internet-enabled devices, or getting information from the Internet, it would likely impact their perceptions of what the Unified Theory of Acceptance and use of Technology (UTAUT) terms “effort expectancy,” or the perceived ease of use (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). According to the UTAUT, effort expectancy is an important element that influences intentions to use a technology, and particularly influences initial program use. Third, low-income parents must be open to receiving *parenting-related* information through the Internet. Although not sufficient to ensure use, these elements are necessary preconditions that set the stage for actual engagement in Internet-based parent training.

Recent investigations suggest that some of these conditions may be satisfied in samples of low-income parents, but key questions remain unanswered. For instance, Mitchell, Godoy, Shabazz, and Horn, (2014) asked a predominately low-income sample of parents in the United States about home Internet access and cell phone ownership. Of participants reporting incomes under \$25,000 per year, 66.9% reported having *home* Internet access and 78.5% reported using their cell phone to access the Internet (rates of Smartphone ownership were not measured). Similarly, Gilbert et al. (2015) found that 85% of low-income, pregnant women in the United States reported access to the Internet, but did not measure Smartphone ownership. Data regarding Smartphone ownership is critical, particularly given their role in helping to close the gap in Internet access between low- and high-income populations (Smith, 2015). Although these investigations have begun to establish rates of Internet access in low-income parents, regularity of access and mode of access still remain uncertain in populations of low-income parents. Moreover, these investigations have not established low-income parents' comfort using Internet-enabled devices or obtaining information from the Internet.

### 1.2. Evidence of engagement in Internet-based parenting interventions

Breitenstein and colleagues (Breitenstein & Gross, 2013; Breitenstein, Fogg, Ocampo, Acosta, & Gross, 2016; Breitenstein, Brager, Ocampo, & Fogg, 2017) created a tablet-based parent training program specifically for low-income parents. In a small ( $n = 9$ ) initial investigation in the United States, parents completed two sessions of the

program over two weeks and provided feedback. Seven parents completed both sessions and two parents completed most, but not all, of the two sessions. Parents rated the program as easy to use (Breitenstein & Gross, 2013). In a subsequent clinical trial (Breitenstein et al., 2016), parents were randomized to either the full, 6-module tablet-based parent training program ( $n = 42$ ) or a control condition ( $n = 41$ ). Rates of program completion were examined in comparison to past attendance at the face-to-face parent training program. In the intervention group, program use was high (average of 85% use across all modules) as was satisfaction with the program. Usage rates were higher than that of the face-to-face parent training program. More recently, Breitenstein et al. (2017) reported that only 2% of parents that were in the intervention group never completed the intervention, and that of the 98% of parents that did use the program, most spent over half an hour on each module. However, participants in all these studies were lent tablets in order to complete the program. Rates of usage and possible barriers with respect to use of parents' own devices are unclear. Parents also sought to participate in the intervention evaluation after learning about the program.

Investigators have also examined engagement with Triple P online (Baker & Sanders, 2017). One-hundred Australian parents, who sought to participate in the program after learning about it through community postings, were randomized to the online intervention. Of these parents, 98 activated their program accounts; 13% of those that activated their account did not do more than the introduction module and 25% did not complete any modules. While parents used their own devices to access the program, it is important to note that this was not a low-income sample (i.e., most parents reported a university degree) and income was also not examined in relation to program engagement. Additionally, participants sought to be in the program (i.e., a treatment seeking population). Thus, these results do little to inform our understanding of use of an online parent training program by low-income parents in the United States.

### 1.3. Further examination of feasibility: the present investigations

We sought to further examine the conditions needed to demonstrate the feasibility of Internet-based parent training for low-income parents through two separate studies. Although there is no universally agreed-upon definition of low-income status, for this investigation we operationally defined low-income to be receipt of income-dependent assistance from the United States government (e.g., nutritional, medical, cash, or child care support). In Study 1, we surveyed low-income parents to measure rates of regular access to the Internet, how parents access the Internet, use of the Internet to obtain general and parenting-specific information, comfort using various Internet-enabled devices, and openness to using the Internet to obtain general and parenting-specific information. We also specifically asked about Smartphone ownership given the important role Smartphones (and tablets, which have similar functionality) have in delivering Internet-based interventions. In Study 2, a pilot investigation, we examined use of an Internet-based parent training program among a predominately low-income sample. A new parent education program was created by the study authors: the program is called the 5-a-Day Parenting Program and encourages brief, daily positive parenting activities to promote children's school readiness. The program was introduced to parents in a community setting and then they were given the opportunity to use the program on their own. Importantly, parents in this study were not actively seeking parenting assistance or information of any kind nor did they take steps to seek program participation (i.e., they were approached in a community setting, they did not respond to an advertisement), and were asked to use their own Internet-enabled device to access the parenting training program. The purpose of Study 2 was not to thoroughly evaluate the impact of the program, but rather to gather a preliminary understanding of if parents were open to using a general online parenting program and if they would make use of it.

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