

Enhancing Father Engagement and Interparental Teamwork in an Evidence-Based Parenting Intervention: A Randomized-Controlled Trial of Outcomes and Processes

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This study examined the outcomes and process in a positive parenting program adapted to enhance father engagement and teamwork. A randomized control trial of the Group Triple P Program with additional father-relevant content was conducted with 42 families of children with conduct problems aged between 3 to 8 years. Families were allocated to either the intervention or waitlist condition. Assessments of child behavior, self- and partner-reported parenting, and the interparental relationship were conducted at T1 (pre), T2 (post), and T3 (6-month follow-up). Observations were used to examine fathers' and mothers' unique and shared contributions to group process during participation in parenting group sessions. Following program completion (T2) intervention group fathers and mothers reported significantly fewer child behavior problems, dysfunctional parenting practices, and interparental conflict about child-rearing than waitlist parents. Intervention group mothers also reported increased parenting confidence and rated their partners as showing significantly fewer dysfunctional parenting practices. Intervention effects were maintained at 6-month follow-up. Observational data showed that fathers and mothers made similar contributions during the

group sessions. The most frequent types of contributions were asking questions and sharing information with other parents about implementing parenting strategies. The key differences between parents were fathers' more frequent use of humor and mothers' more frequent sharing of personal stories and reporting co-parenting cooperation. The levels of session attendance and program satisfaction were high for both fathers and mothers. Findings highlight the potential benefits of efforts to engage both fathers and mothers for program adherence, satisfaction, and effectiveness.

Keywords: randomized-controlled trial; conduct problems; behavioral family intervention; father; mother

THERE IS EXTENSIVE EVIDENCE that parenting interventions based on social learning principles improve conduct problems and family risk factors associated with disruptive behavior in children (Dretzke et al., 2009; Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014). Fathers are much less likely than mothers to participate in interventions, yet current research suggests the possibility that increased father involvement in Behavioral Family Interventions (BFIs) is likely to be highly beneficial for young children with conduct problems (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008).

Findings from a small number of studies suggest that improvements in child behavior are more likely to be maintained over time when both parents take part in the program (Bagner & Eyberg, 2003;

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Webster-Stratton, 1985). One reason for these findings is that as both parents get the same message about child behavior management strategies they may be able to support and help each other, leading to greater interparental consistency and lower conflict (Bagner & Eyberg, 2003; Webster-Stratton). Parenting strategies are more likely to be effective when both parents agree on one approach (Arnold, O'Leary, & Edwards, 1997) and implement it consistently (Frick, Christian, & Wootton, 1999). Furthermore, children's positive adjustment has been associated with high-quality co-parenting behaviors, such as teamwork and support for the other parent, lack of conflict over child-rearing, and agreement on child-related topics (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

While there is some evidence that BFIs targeted solely at fathers are effective for improving child behavior and fathers' parenting immediately after an intervention, program effects may not generalize to the nontreated mother (Fabiano et al., 2012). Furthermore, many men are unwilling to attend father-only groups (Russell et al., 1999). These results support the need to include both parents in a BFI where possible, to increase the likelihood that intervention effects will maintain for both parents. Other potential benefits of fathers and mothers taking part together include strengthening the partner relationship, increasing father engagement with their children, and reducing interparental conflict (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). This may be especially important for fathers given the strong correlation between marital quality and positive parenting for fathers (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

However, barriers to father participation in BFIs have been identified, including aspects of the program content and delivery (Fabiano, 2007). One method that program developers have used to ensure the quality and ecological fit of interventions is to obtain parent input in order to help refine existing programs to meet the needs of specific parent groups (Sanders & Kirby, 2011). A consumer preference approach to the refinement and tailoring of an evidence-based program can increase the engagement of key target groups. It also helps to develop guidance that allows practitioners to flexibly deliver evidence-based parenting programs to specific target groups (Mazucchelli & Sanders, 2010). In this study, father preference data (Frank, Keown, Dittman, & Sanders, 2015) were used to adapt an existing widely used parenting program, Group Triple P, to encourage father engagement and promote teamwork between parents. In particular, content was added to increase the relevance of examples for fathers and to encourage participation in program sessions by both parents.

This study also addresses limitations of previous research where there has been some father involvement in BFIs for young children (Sanders et al., 2014). This was achieved through including both parents in all aspects of the data collection process, having equivalent numbers of mothers and fathers in the sample, and data analysis that is gender-disaggregated (for a review see Panter-Brick et al., 2014). These methodological improvements should enable a better understanding of the effectiveness of the intervention for fathers separately from mothers. Furthermore, this study addresses another key research limitation that has possible implications for teamwork between parents: including both fathers and mothers in all aspects of screening. Most parenting interventions do not appear to involve fathers in the initial recruitment interviews. Selection for inclusion in programs is based largely on mothers' reports of child behavior (Connell, Sanders, & Markie-Dadds, 1997; Sanders et al., 2000) or it is not specified whether screening data were collected from both parents (Webster-Stratton, 1992). Father engagement and motivation to participate, their willingness to learn and implement the strategies and to support their partner, seems more likely to occur if fathers as well as mothers view their child's behavior as problematic.

There is little, if any, observational data about within-session behavior of fathers, per se, and of fathers and mothers when both parents are participating in a BFI for child conduct problems. Several studies have shown that parental engagement and quality of participation during sessions predict program outcomes (Garvey et al., 2006; Nix et al., 2009). However, these studies measured participant engagement using practitioner ratings that were totalled across several indicators, making it unclear which aspects of participation were important for intervention response. In contrast, recorded observations of group sessions have the advantage of being available for later coding of specific participant behaviors. Recordings also capture any changes in rates or types of participation as sessions progress, as well as allow comparisons between mothers' and fathers' contributions. In relation to this last point, some research has suggested that fathers may inhibit conversation among mothers and facilitators (MacLeod, 2008), while other research indicates that some professionals perceive that men may be less willing to talk if their partner is also in the group (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2008).

The main aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Group Triple P Program that had additional father-relevant content, for fathers and mothers of children with early-onset conduct problems. A second aim of the study was to explore

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