Community-Based Parent Support Programs

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Topic
Parenting skills

Introduction

Community-based parent support programs differ from traditional human services parenting programs in both form and function.[1] For the purposes of this review, parent support programs are defined as community-based initiatives designed to promote the flow of resources and supports to parents that strengthen functioning and enhance the growth and development of individual family members.

The primary goal of these programs is to provide support and information in ways that help parents become more capable and competent.[2,3] Research now indicates that in order to reach this goal, it is necessary that staff use practices that are family-centered as opposed to professionally-centered.[4-6] The key characteristics of family-centered practices include: treating families with dignity and respect; providing individual, flexible and responsive support; sharing information so families can make informed decisions; ensuring family choice regarding intervention options; and providing the necessary resources and supports for parents to care for their children in ways that produce optimal child and parent outcomes.[7-10]

Parenting support programs use a variety of methods for providing resources and support. Home visiting programs and community-based parenting support programs are two different approaches to enhancing parents' abilities to support their children's development.[11] This review examines evidence concerning the effectiveness of parent support programs that are primarily community-based programs offering parenting classes, parent/child play groups, information and advice and so on. Parent support programs that use home visiting as the major means for delivering parenting services are described elsewhere.[2,12] Research demonstrates that when community-based parent support programs provide a variety of parenting guidance and support options in a family-centered manner, parents' confidence and competence is enhanced, and parents are more likely to interact with their children in ways that promote the children's social and emotional development.[13]

Subject

Parent support programs aim to support and strengthen existing parenting abilities and promote the development of new competencies so that parents have the knowledge and skills needed to carry out child-rearing responsibilities and provide their children with experiences and opportunities that promote child learning and development.[14] Community-based parenting support programs typically include the following features: early support to families, universal access for families, and family involvement at all levels of program operation.[15] These community-based parent support programs often encompass a variety of parenting activities, including, but not limited to, parent/child play groups, parent information classes and support groups, parenting materials, and individualized parent supports provided in response to particular child-rearing concerns or specific parenting questions, and so on. Providing or helping parents gain access to other types of supports and resources, such as medical or child care resources, so that they have the physical and psychological time and energy to parent effectively is also an important aspect of these programs.[16,3]

Community-based parent support programs operate under the belief that when parents receive parenting support as well as the general support they need, they are more likely to feel better about themselves and their parenting abilities, and in turn interact with their children in responsive and supportive ways that will enhance the development of their young children.[3] The foundations for this proposition are derived from a variety of sources. Bronfenbrenner,[16] Cochran[17] and others[18,19] have noted that parenting knowledge and skills are learned and strengthened by the kinds of help and assistance provided by informal and formal social support network members. The extent to which help and assistance enhance or compromise parenting competence and confidence depends to a large degree on the ways in which help is provided.[20-23] Consequently, efforts to provide supports and resources to parents must be made in a way that enhances rather than diminishes parenting capacity. Enhancing parenting capacity is one major goal of family-centered help-giving practices.[2,24]

In a family-centered help-giving approach to working with parents, professionals move away from viewing themselves as the experts who, from their point of view, determine the needs of parents and prescribe what parents need to do to improve their life circumstances.[5,25] In contrast, family-centered practitioners see themselves as agents of the parents, helping families obtain the necessary individual resources, supports and services.[4,26] Consistent with the aims and goals of parent support programs, family-centered practices support and enhance parents' capacities to promote the development of their young children, including their social and emotional development.[27]

Problem

Enhancing and strengthening the social and emotional development of young children is one important outcome of community-based parenting programs. The relationship between what program staff do (both activities and practices) and how parents enhance the social and emotional development of their young children is often implicitly rather than explicitly stated in parent support research. Knowledge of the particular characteristics of community-based parent support programs that enhance parents'

capacities to promote their children's social and emotional development can inform practice. This paper includes information about the empirical evidence concerning the relationship between family-centered help-giving practices, parenting competence and confidence, and the social and emotional development of young children.

Research Context
By design, most parent support programs offer individualized, multifaceted "interventions" to parents in response to their changing needs. Though many studies have not been designed to disentangle the effects of these interventions, it is possible, by paying careful attention to the proper variables, to understand the most important characteristics of family support program practices.

Key Research Questions
The research questions to be answered are the following: (1) Does providing parent support in a family-centered manner increase parents' sense of confidence and competence in their parenting ability? and (2) Do parent support programs enhance parents' abilities to interact with their young children in ways that lead to the children's positive social and emotional development?

Recent Research
Research on the effectiveness of community-based parent support programs focuses on both what is done and how it is done. An understanding of the relationship between these two aspects of program practices is very important in order to identify the relative importance of program characteristics on parenting competence, and ultimately the link between parenting support programs and the social and emotional development of young children.

Family-centered help-giving. Research has shown that parenting and family support provided in a family-centered manner is related to optimal parent and family benefits.[6,9,13,28-35] Two important dimensions of family-centered help-giving practices, relational and participatory practices,[36,37] have been found to make individual contributions to improvements in parent and family functioning. Relational practices include behaviours typically associated with effective help-giving (compassion, active listening, etc.) and positive staff attributions about program participant capabilities (mutual trust, collaboration, etc.). Participatory help-giving practices include behaviours that involve program participant choice and decision-making, and which meaningfully involve participants in actively procuring or obtaining desired resources or supports. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that participatory help-giving practices have a greater influence on parent functioning than do relational help-giving practices.[38]

Parenting confidence and competence. Findings pertaining to factors associated with differences in parenting competence were found in a study of parent support programs.[13] In this study, two approaches (survey and case studies) were used to identify the ways in which supports were provided and how supports were related to different aspects of parenting competence. The measures of parenting competence included: (1) parenting choice and control over child-rearing and family supports and (2) parenting beliefs about

desired child behaviour (ranging on a continuum from child compliance with adult directions to child self-initiated competence). Using multiple regression analysis by sets with the survey data, providing support in a family-centered manner was found to have the greatest impact on parenting competence and confidence. Secondly, it was found that the largest majority of families in the case studies considered child-initiated interaction as opposed to adult-directed interaction to be the most important and most desired type of parent-child interaction. This second finding is worth noting because it suggests that parents are more likely to benefit from parenting interventions that emphasize child-initiated and child-directed learning. These types of child behaviours have been found to be associated with optimal child social and emotional outcomes.[19]

Social-emotional development. There are a number of evaluations of parent support programs that demonstrate a relationship between parent support program practices and the social and emotional development of young children. One of the largest evaluations of family support programs in the United States was conducted by Abt Associates.[39] In a meta-analysis of 260 studies, 63% of the programs used parent meetings/classes/groups or parent-child classes/groups as the primary service delivery approach (49% used home visits). The investigators found that family support programs had small positive effects on children's social and emotional development. For randomized studies only, the effect size of the family support practices on children's social and emotional development was .26. Programs that specifically emphasized parents' emotional, educational and/or economic development had an average effect size of .56 on children's social and emotional outcomes. When comparing programs that used parent groups versus home visiting models, the average effect sizes on child social and emotional outcomes were .26 and .15 respectively. These findings suggest that parent support programs that focus on parent development as a primary goal have a positive influence on children's social and emotional development.

One parent support program that has operated for over 30 years is Avance, a community-based organization that provides parent support and education services to high-risk economically impoverished families.[40] The program serves mostly low-income Hispanic families with a child under three years of age. The program includes weekly centre-based parenting education classes conducted for nine months, monthly home visit follow-up, child care, transportation, information and referral, and advocacy support. Research has found many positive effects associated with Avance.[41] In terms of children's social and emotional development, parents who participated in the program demonstrated heightened enjoyment during their interactions with their children, and were more responsive to their children's emotional needs and requests compared to parents in a non-intervention group.[40]

An evaluation conducted by Dunst and Trivette[13] examined the relationship between family-centered help-giving practices and the social development of children whose parents participated in different parent support programs. The evaluation included parents who participated in a number of family resource centres operated by an early childhood education program. The centres offered parenting support activities and provided or mediated the provision of family and community resources. Results showed that the

staff's use of family-centered help-giving practices, particularly participatory help-giving practices, was the major factor associated with parents' judgments of their children's emotional competence. The effect size between the use of participatory help-giving practices and child emotional competence was .35.

Conclusions

There is a converging body of evidence indicating that community-based parent support programs operated in a family-centered manner increase parents' sense of parenting confidence and competence. Participatory family-centered help-giving practices that actively involve parents in deciding what knowledge is important to them and how they want to acquire the information they need have the greatest positive effect on parents' sense of competence and confidence.[13] More specifically, available research evidence concerning the social and emotional development of young children indicates that a more confident and responsive style of parent interaction is more likely to lead to positive social and emotional development.[39,40]

Implications

Parent support programs can have important positive effects on the social and emotional development of young children. However, one of the key features of these programs is not only what is offered, but how supports are provided. Family-centered help-giving practices must form the basis of the interactions between staff and families to ensure the enhancement of parents' capacities and give them the confidence necessary to interact with and promote the social and emotional development of their children.

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