A preventive group intervention for couples who are parents

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SOCIETAL PROBLEMS 1960-1980
(they are still here)

- Increasing divorce rate (now leveling off, but still high)
- Single parenthood
- Fathers’ absence from families – and from the literature
- Increasing incidence of diagnosable problems in children and adolescents
- Increasing economic disparities that affect families
WHERE TO INTERVENE?
The SILOS PROBLEM
Parenting Classes:

What’s missing?
POSITIVE

Benefits of fathers’ involvement for:

Moms’ well-being
Children’s development
Dads own health and well-being
Even though “fathers are welcome”

in parenting classes and

in therapeutic interventions for parents (Triple P, Magic Years)

about 90% of the parents participating in these programs are mothers
“BUT THERE ARE SO MANY SINGLE-MOTHER FAMILIES…”

“Single-mother”, “lone-mother” are misnomers

Typically, people who are co-parents with mothers are potential resources for childrearing

But
They are not listed on social service case files or invited to meetings about the children, not even when they are fathers married to the children’s mothers
FATHER INVOLVEMENT INTERVENTIONS

What’s missing?
Children who see their parents unable to resolve high level conflict or involved in a silent “deep freeze” are more likely to have:

- academic difficulties
- higher levels of aggression, depression or both
- trouble getting along with peers
- difficulty forming satisfying intimate relationships of their own
Why is the Co-Parents’ Relationship So Important?

Our research and studies by Gordon Harold, Mark Cummings, Patrick Davies, and others make clear that:

Unresolved couple conflict (arguments or “deep freeze”, especially in front of the children, predicts children’s:

• Aggression
• Hyperactivity
• Depression
• Social withdrawal
• Academic problems
AND, A SAD FACT

Couple relationship quality declines over time
Hirschberger, Srivastava, Marsh, Cowan, & Cowan (2009)

Child’s Age

Marital Satisfaction

0 0.5 1.5 3.5 4.5 5.5 6.5 9.5 14.5

80 85 90 95 100 105 110 115 120 125 130
COURTPE RELATIONSHIP INTERVENTIONS

What’s missing?
The single best predictor of whether fathers will become involved with their children is the quality of their relationship with the mother of the child in married, divorced, cohabiting, and single parent families.
We are going to describe an intervention approach that integrates these approaches.
HOW TO INTERVENE?
Groups for couples/co-parents:

• Couples therapy is not feasible for all

• Embedding couples in a supportive environment at similar family-making or vulnerable-making transitions

• Normalizing (“I was so relieved to find that we’re not the only ones struggling”)

• Learning from other couples’ experiences, not just from “experts”
A FAMILY SYSTEMS VIEW OF RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS
In our assessments and interventions, we focus on 5 aspects of family life:

**PARENTS AS INDIVIDUALS:** To increase their coping with internal stressors and meet their individual needs

**THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP:** To increase collaborative problem-solving, decrease couple conflict, and foster satisfaction

**PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS:** To increase fathers’ involvement, both parents’ age-appropriate parenting strategies, and more collaborative co-parenting

**FAMILY OF ORIGIN:** To help parents break negative intergenerational cycles of harsh treatment and abuse

**STRESSORS and SUPPORTS:** To develop strategies for coping with external stressors and increase supports from family, friends, and social services
Our Family Systems Model of Risks/Protections

Culture
Economic forces

Social support and Life Stress

Work
Friends
School
Peers
THE INTERVENTION APPROACH

Including both fathers and mothers

- Helps to strengthen the relationship between the parents
- Helps to strengthen parenting in mother-child and father-child relationships
- Encourages more conscious choices of relationship patterns in THIS generation and strengthens 3-generational ties
GROUPS FOR PARTNERS AND PARENTS

• Each group has 5 or 6 couples or 8 to 10 dads
• Male-female co-leaders trained to work with couple and parent-child relationships
• 2-hour weekly meetings
• originally 24 weeks for expectant parents
• now 16 weeks for parents of children from birth to adolescence
We began with a radical idea:

Parents don’t need to be told what *to do* or *not to do* by teaching parenting and relationship skills in a lecture format;

Rather, parents will respond to help to become the parents and partners they want to be – if offered a safe group format that invites them to examine their own values, try some new strategies, and learn what works best for them - from each other and from skilled leaders.
CURRICULUM

- Open-ended check-in every week (unstructured)
- Theme for each meeting based on one of the 5 risk and protective factors
- Short presentations by the facilitators
- Exercises (e.g., role plays of parenting strategies, couple communication styles)
- Discussions (e.g., what each parent hopes to revise from patterns in their families-of-origin)
- Videos or clips from movies to bring the concepts alive
EXAMPLES

• 2 small Paper bags: Drawings of How people see me on the outside bag and How I really am on the inside bag

Or

• Role play of parent conflict watched by child

Or

• Family Circles to show closeness and distance between the family members

• Homework (e.g., plan a date to nurture your relationship as a couple—but you can’t spend more than 2 dollars or pounds or euros
IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION
**BECOMING A FAMILY**
(1975-1985)

*Funded by U.S. National Institute of Mental Health

Couple relationship satisfaction*
from first pregnancy to child in kindergarten

Baby + Intervention
Baby, No intervention

50% of participants at or below clinical cut-off

SCHOOLCHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES (1990-2004)*

*Funded by the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health

INTERVENTION COMPARED WITH CONTROL GROUP
- 5 YRS LATER: (PRE-KINDERGARTEN TO GRADE 4)

Parenting focus

Couple focus

Decreased couple conflict and volatility

Decreased authoritarian parenting

- Child depression

+ Child well-being

- Child aggression

+ Child achieve.
From the children’s transition to elementary school (kindergarten, age 5) to their transition to high school (9th grade, age 15)

THESE EFFECTS LASTED FOR 10 YEARS
SUPPORTING FATHER INvolVEMENT (2003-2012)*

*Funded by the California Office of Child Abuse Prevention, Dept. of Social Services

Development and Evaluation Team

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PHASE I

289 low-income Mexican American and European American couples in 4 California counties
- randomly offered groups or no intervention
- all completed pre and post tests

75% married
2/3 w incomes below poverty levels
RESULTS: We compared outcomes over 18 months for those in 16-week groups for couples or fathers only, or a 3-hour one-time group meeting for couples (the control condition)

• Control group mothers and fathers did not change or got worse, their children’s problem behaviors increased, and their satisfaction as a couple declined

• Fathers groups helped fathers become more involved in their children’s care (less gender stereotyped), the children’s problem behaviors remained stable, but parents’ satisfaction as a couple declined

• Couples groups helped fathers become more involved, reduced parenting stress, kept the children’s problem behaviors stable, and parents’ couple satisfaction remained stable
PHASE II

- 276 new low-income families in couples groups in 5 California counties completed pre and post tests
- Mexican American
- European American
- African American

RESULTS AS GOOD OR BETTER THAN IN PHASE I
PHASE III

239 new low-income families
  in couples groups
  in the same 5 counties
  completed pre and post tests

Were randomly offered:
- Couples groups beginning immediately OR
- A Waitlist for groups to begin in 6 months

50% of these families were referred by Child Welfare staff
- Couples assessed as safe to work with together now;
  no current child abuse, neglect, or Domestic Violence

50% of families recruited from the community
  as in prior 2 phases
At the follow-up 2 months after the 16-week immediate groups ended:

Participants from immediate groups showed:

• A significant decline in couple distress (less couple conflict, conflict about their children, violent problem-solving). *This was especially true for those most distressed when they began.*

• A significant increase in fathers’ involvement in the “who does what?” of childcare (less gender-stereotyped childcare roles)
HOW WE THINK THE INTERVENTION WORKS

THEORY AND DATA
THE FAMILY SYSTEM VIEW

Change in parts of the system reverberate throughout the system
Our Family Systems Model of Risks/Protections

Culture
Economic forces

Work
School
Peers
Friends

Social support and Life Stress

Social support and Life Stress

School
Friends
Peers
DISSEMINATION OF SUPPORTING FATHER INVOLVEMENT
CANADA – CALGARY, ALBERTA, 4 SITES*
WITH CONSULTATION BY THE PRUETTS

106 couples - 12 months after entering the study:

Positive effects on:
- fathers’ involvement, parenting stress,
- parenting conflict, violent problem solving,
- avoidant problem-solving

- Children’s behavior problems and
- Couple relationship quality

*Pruett et al., 2016
ENGLAND

Parents As Partners*

TAVISTOCK RELATIONSHIPS and FAMILY ACTION – 10 sites

with consultation by the COWANS

(*Using the Supporting Father Involvement curriculum from earlier studies)
Parents as Partners: Early outcomes

Honor Rhodes and Lucy Draper
PUBLISHED RESULTS: 1ST 100 COUPLES* FOLLOW-UP 6 MONTHS AFTER ENTRY

- DECLINE in parents’ psychological distress (CORE)
- REDUCTION in couple conflict about the children
- REDUCTION in violent problem-solving
- REDUCTION in parenting stress
- REDUCTION in children’s overall emotional and behavioral problems (SDQ)
- INCREASE in couple relationship satisfaction

and

- 55% of the initially unemployed parents got jobs

*Casey et al., 2017
DISSEMINATION IN PROGRESS

- **Malta**: Couples Groups organized by Ingrid Grech Lanfranco, PhD, trained at Tavistock Relationships

- **Poland**: (facilitators trained by Tavistock Relationships facilitator)

- **Israel**: Groups under way now organized by Naomi Dardik (UC Berkeley MSW - trained at Tavistock Relationships)
CONCLUSIONS

- Couples therapy is actually a preventive intervention that has the power to enhance children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development.

- Ideally parenting interventions should include fathers and also focus on the co-parenting relationship.

- Father involvement interventions should include more focus on the relationship between parents.

- The group intervention modality has power.

- What we’re really advocating in therapy and prevention for family members is a family systems perspective on the intervention.


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