

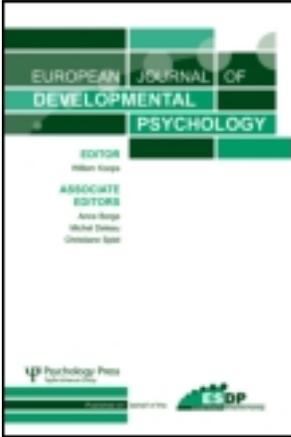
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Introduction: Evidence-based parent education programmes to promote positive parenting

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Introduction: Evidence-based parent education programmes to promote positive parenting

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This paper introduces the context and contributions of this special issue. The essence of promoting positive parenting is seeking not only to reduce the impact of risk factors, but also to increase that of protective factors, by reinforcing the parenting role. The paper makes clear that this aim is served only by developing evidence-based family education programmes aimed at supporting positive parenting. The special issue offers a broad range of such programmes from several countries.

Keywords: Positive parenting; Parent education programmes; Child abuse; Intervention research.

For many years now, researchers have been examining how the family ecology and the quality of parenting shape the child's wellbeing (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981). Less consideration has been given, however, to the study of the resources and capabilities that parents should bring into the parenting task and their multiple needs for support (Budd, 2005; Reder, Duncan, & Lucey, 2003; White, 2005). As a consequence, the realization of the parenting task has been implicitly conceived as a personal and solitary endeavour for which all parents are well

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prepared to bear the responsibility of bringing up their children. Even child protection agencies have mainly adopted a stance of control and supervision of malfunctioning families pointing out their deficiencies and problems rather than focusing on family strengths and opportunities to support them. Communities, in turn, have also disregarded the fact that all kinds of families need support and that the quality of children's lives is very much dependent on the existence of these collaborative networks around the families.

Fortunately, the situation is changing. Even the most vulnerable families are no longer defined by their negative profile, but according to the assets and resources they have for parenting their children. It is only by recognizing their strengths and capabilities that we are able to provide them with the support they really need. Services are aiming at taking a preventive stance by seeking not only to reduce the impact of risk factors on child development, but also to increase that of protective factors, by reinforcing the parenting role. A growing body of evidence suggests that the improvements in the quality of parenting children receive can contribute to reducing child problems and can enhance positive development (e.g., Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003; O'Connor & Scott, 2006; Spoth, Kavanagh, & Dishion, 2002). At the same time, it is increasingly recognized that parents themselves have a say in the process, not only as receivers or recipients of help, but as partners and contributors to their own process of change, drawing upon their own experiences of what works in their families (Daly, 2007). Finally, quality assurance in the provision of services has been placed at the forefront of efforts by researchers, professionals and policy makers to deliver the best evidence-based programmes aimed at supporting parents (Spiel, 2009). In the end, there is a growing consensus that parenting should be framed in terms of a "community" of key parties: parents, children, local and national service providers, and the communities themselves.

POSITIVE PARENTING AND EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMMES

The main objective of this special issue is to illustrate this process of change by focusing on some of the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects involved in the evidence-based evaluation of family educational programmes aimed at supporting positive parenting. The main novelty that this special issue brings is the compilation of studies involving experiences of parent education programmes from several countries. Despite their variety, the parent education programmes described here are generally meant to help parents develop and enhance their parenting skills by trying alternate approaches to childrearing, improving the family learning environment,

fostering their sense of personal competence, and strengthening their capability to draw upon available resources for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their young and adolescent children. The objectives of the papers are to develop theoretically based prevention programmes, to evaluate their effectiveness according to standards of evidence, and to examine factors that influence implementation process. The papers also provide recommendations for researchers to establish stable cooperation with politicians, officials, service providers, and practitioners. In this introductory paper, we will first introduce some of the main ideas of the underlying framework that give coherence to the papers collected for this special issue. We will then briefly present the papers, and finally we will draw some conclusions and point out future challenges.

All of the papers fall under the umbrella of the positive parenting framework and the evidence-based movement. The notion of positive parenting was defined by the Council of Europe Recommendation Rec(2006)19 on Policy to Support Positive Parenting as: “parental behavior based on the best interest of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child” (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2006). The Recommendation places a focus on the development of positive parent–child relationships to optimize the child’s development and wellbeing, following a dynamic view of socialization in which parental and child agency should be taken into account as important contributors to child development (Daly, 2007; Rodrigo, 2010). The Recommendation also aims at making member states aware of the necessity to provide parents with sufficient support to meet their important responsibilities in bringing up their children. Member states are encouraged to take all appropriate legislative, administrative and financial measures to create the best possible conditions for positive parenting. They are also called upon to support parents in their upbringing tasks through adequate family policy measures that provide the necessary material conditions for families and the provision of services to support parents, especially those parents and children at psychosocial risk. Concerning services, the Recommendation specifically proposes that psychoeducational resources such as parenting programmes should be made available to all parents.

According to the Survey on the Role of Parents and Support from the Governments in the European Union (ChildONEurope Secretariat, 2007), most European countries have shown a strong interest in investing in research and training, in order to guarantee adequate and effective support to parents. However, the majority of services and programmes are not evidence-based practices, have not undergone scientific evaluation, or have failed to demonstrate effective prevention impact when they have been

rigorously evaluated. One possible reason for this is that standards of evidence are still not extensively implemented in the area of education and an evidence-based reform has not been attained in most European policies (Spiel, 2009). In the United States, the demand for evidence-based programming began primarily in the 1990s and came from federal agencies addressing problems of substance abuse and poor mental health among young people. In the past 20 years, prevention researchers have developed and tested a number of effective parenting and family interventions. However, only about 10% of practitioners are implementing these family strengthening programmes and only about 25% are implementing these faithfully (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). Therefore, although many standards have been developed to define what constitutes evidence that a given programme works (e.g., Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Flay et al., 2005; Kellam & Langevin, 2003), there are still difficulties in bringing evidence to practice and policy (McCall, 2009).

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND VARIOUS CONTEXTS

The studies presented in this special issue are part of the evidence-based movement. As such, they allow us to illustrate some important aspects that emerge when examining the impact of particular parent education programmes in real-life contexts. To begin with, the papers in this issue provide an international picture of the situation surrounding evidence-based programming by describing cases from the following countries (in alphabetical order): Austria (C. Spiel & Strohmeier; Finsterwald & G. Spiel), Finland (Salmela-Aro), Germany (Reichle et al.), the Netherlands (Deković et al.; Koops), Portugal (Almeida et al.), Spain (Rodrigo et al.), the United Kingdom (Scott et al.; McDonald et al.) and the United States of America (Kumpfer et al.). In this way, we can ascertain to what extent the evidence-based movement has been incorporated into the family policies of these countries. A second feature is that almost all studies have run evaluations of parent education programmes under a schema of partnership between universities/research institutes and other national or private agencies. This is a good opportunity to connect the research done by university scholars to the applied world of practitioners and that of policy makers. A third feature of the studies comprising this special issue is that they are targeted (albeit not exclusively) at parents and cover several prevention fields: intervention in developmental periods such as the transition to parenthood (Salmela-Aro; Reichle et al.), intervention to prevent children's problem behaviours (Scott et al.; Deković et al.), intervention for low-income and at-risk parents to prevent child maltreatment (McDonald et al.; Rodrigo et al.; Almeida et al.), intervention to

prevent drug and alcohol use and other behavioural problems (Kumpfer et al.) and intervention to prevent mental health problems (Finsterwald & G. Spiel). Therefore, the overall picture that emerges is quite balanced with respect to the areas of prevention.

The studies presented also focus on different topics of evidence-based programming, providing an enriching view of the process. Thus, the first paper by Koops provides a historical frame to the parenting issue illustrating how looking back at the history of childhood is worthwhile to learn more about the origins of the social construction of childhood as a stage differentiated from the adult state. This differentiation lays the foundations of the modern plea for respecting the children's rights and recognizing their need for protection against even the mildest form of child abuse. The next three papers emphasize the importance of selecting the right moment to start with a parenting intervention, such as for instance the transition to parenthood (Salmela-Aro; Reichle et al.) or during the early childhood years (Scott et al.). In the first case, Salmela-Aro illustrates how the life-span model of motivation is helpful in explaining the changes in personal goals that occur during the transitional period to parenthood, how these changes affect several outcomes and how an intervention programme may support parents during the whole process. Reichle et al., in turn, after reviewing the internal and external changes that occur in the transitions in the family lifecycle, especially during the transition to parenthood, propose a preventive intervention for first-time parents ("Beginnings Matter"/"Auf den anfang kommt es an" in German) and provide evidence of its effectiveness when applied in real-life contexts. Scott et al. are interested in proving the efficacy of parenting programmes aimed selectively at reducing problem behaviours (Incredible Years) or increasing children's reading ability (The SPOKES literacy programme), as two important outcomes of early childhood development with important consequences for later adjustment. By comparing these programmes with a new one that tapped the two outcomes simultaneously (The Helping Children Achieve Trial), they expect to tease out which intervention elements (teaching parents only to read with their children and/or teaching them to relate better emotionally) are responsible for which improvement on the child side. This brings us a step closer to knowing how different components may effectively change the expected child outcomes.

The next three papers (Deković et al.; McDonald et al.; Rodrigo et al.) try to shape the process of change, but following a micro and macro strategy, respectively. Deković et al., propose that well-conducted intervention research has the potential to serve the dual aim of enhancing child and youth developmental outcomes and elucidating important developmental

processes and mechanisms of change. Parenting programmes (e.g., the Home-Start programme) should be based on a theory of change that can be tested, suggesting mediation mechanisms (for instance the parent's sense of self-competence) that may influence the parental and child outcomes. Framing questions in this manner moves researchers from looking solely at average outcome pre-post/control differences to examining how, why, and when the inner mechanisms and parts of a programme lead to desired outcomes. The other two papers (McDonald et al.; Rodrigo et al.) broaden the scope of the evaluation focus to include the context of application of the programme. Because programmes are typically part of some larger organizational operation, the best designs for impact evaluations are developmental and systemic and should examine the concurrence of multiple ingredients and agents that make the programme work. McDonald et al., drawing on their vast experience with the FAST programme (Families and Schools Together) in several countries, describe the incentives and strategies for engaging and retaining at-risk families that have produced the high enrolment rates achieved in the programme. Rodrigo et al. show the best ways to implement the parental group interventions, for instance the Personal and Family Support programme, at the local social services level, and propose that the long-term improvement of professional competences among group monitors is an important programme outcome that could contribute to its sustainability.

The next paper (Kumpfer et al.) describes the efforts made to perform cultural adaptations of the Strengthening Families Programme (SFP), a highly rated programme developed by Kumpfer et al., which aimed at preventing drug and alcohol abuse and promoting mental health in children and adolescents. Kumpfer et al. propose that the evidence that a programme works should be based on multiple randomized control trials and field trials with different populations and researchers. Therefore, culturally adapting evidence-based programmes is the best and safest route. However, instead of developing parenting programmes specific to each race or ethnicity's parenting issues, the authors recommend that culturally relevant principles be derived to guide modifications of existing programmes. They also define the next steps for the dissemination of the programme to developing nations.

The last three papers broaden the scope of the special issue to encompass large-scale processes that are also part of evidence-based programming. Thus, Finsterwald and G. Spiel present a case study of quality assurance based on the evaluation of the organizational goals regarding family involvement in the "ProMente Kinder Jugend Familie" (ProMente: Children, Adolescents, Families), a community-based NGO (non-governmental organization) dedicated to fostering the positive development of

mentally impaired children and adolescents. Some years ago, the evaluation of services at NGOs often consisted simply of counts of the number of people served, their demographic characteristics, the specific services they received as well as the degree of client satisfaction. Nowadays, however, there are increasing demands for the whole range of social policy and other decisions and programmes run by the NGO sector to be based on sound evidence to improve their own functioning. In turn, Almeida et al. present a nationwide study aimed at identifying a variety of ongoing family interventions targeting at-risk families throughout Portugal, and evaluating them using the same protocol to assess their impact on several parental and outcome measures. The results of this study, which involved a network of universities and practitioners who were running the programmes, are necessary for policy makers in the regulation of parent education programmes as best practices to support child protection in that country. C. Spiel and Strohmeier discuss issues connecting relevant research to good practices as well as to appropriate policy measures, placing the emphasis on the need for intensive cooperation between researchers, politicians, administrators and the media. To illustrate their tenets, they use the National Strategy for Violence Prevention in the Austrian Public School System as a successful example of establishing sustainable cooperation between research, policy and practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Europe is facing major challenges in promoting evidence-based plans of action and parenting programmes based on international standards and research. The full implementation of the Council of Europe Recommendation on positive parenting requires an appropriate response to these challenges. In this sense, there is a need to identify parenting programmes that work in different countries and to promote more rigorous research on effective parenting programmes that not only provides information about the quality of the programmes but is also useful in informing social actions and social policies. As the evidence-based movement advances within the education field, broader quality standards and design criteria for implementation, generalizability, sustainability and cost factors should be incorporated. It is also important to develop standards for good practices to validate parent support work. The role of the practitioner skill and fidelity is really important in getting good outcomes, as good implementation cannot be done by fully trained volunteers or poorly trained paid staff. Finally, a good dissemination of research results to the practitioners, policy-makers and public in general is absolutely crucial. In this way, the schema of positive parenting can be properly transferred to the practical knowledge to be applied in real-life settings offering services to

families and children. With this special issue, we hope to have contributed to a new generation of studies with a focus on the positive aspects of parenting, on the development of evidence-based parenting programmes, on the roles and responsibilities for professionals in promoting positive parenting and the best ways to disseminate results and to inform family policy measures.

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