

SPECIAL REPORT

Research from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Parents Anonymous® Outcome Evaluation: Promising Findings for Child Maltreatment Reduction

Parents Anonymous® mutual support groups for parents are aimed at strengthening families and reducing child maltreatment. NCCD

performed a national evaluation to assess whether parent participation in Parents Anonymous® was associated with change in child maltreatment outcomes and in risk and protective factors. The study sought to answer the question: Does Parents Anonymous® work to reduce the risk of child maltreatment and, if so, for all parents or for some more than others?

The results of this evaluation show that parents were positively affected in a variety of important ways by their experience with Parents Anonymous®.

After attending Parents Anonymous® meetings, parents indicated a statistically significant reduction of risk factors for child abuse and neglect:

- Less potential for child maltreatment
- Less aggression towards their children
- Reduced experience of life stress
- Reduced drug and alcohol use
- Reduced intimate partner emotional violence.

This NCCD Special Report briefly describes the structure and goals of Parents Anonymous® and summarizes the NCCD outcome evaluation and its findings.

Importantly, parents with the most pressing needs always showed statistically significant improvement with regard to those needs.

Further findings, although not statistically significant, showed trends for reduced physical aggression toward children, reduced physical violence between intimate partners, less parental stress, and increased social support.

The study revealed improvement on child maltreatment outcomes in parents with a wide variety of demographics, background characteristics, and needs.

Further qualitative interviews with a second sample of Parents Anonymous® participants provided supporting evidence that meeting attendance is associated with the beneficial outcomes Parents Anonymous® is intended to effect.

The study shows that Parents Anonymous® is a promising program for the reduction of child maltreatment.

Parents Anonymous®

A central precept of Parents Anonymous® is the belief that parents are in the best position to help other parents, and in doing so, help themselves. Parents Anonymous® meetings are co-led by a professionally trained facilitator and a participating parent who is selected by the other parents in the group and who receives training in the model. By virtue of their contribution to the group and their own progress, participating parents are an essential part of the process. An atmosphere of confidentiality, trust, and openness is created in which each parent can participate fully. Meetings are ongoing, weekly, and free of charge.

Key Parents Anonymous® Principles

Mutual Support: parents give and receive support.

Parent Leadership: parents must feel ownership of the program so that they can participate fully and enhance their self-esteem.

Shared Leadership: ownership is held by both staff and parents.

Parents Anonymous® Ethos: anonymity, confidentiality, and a commitment to bettering oneself and the lives of one's children.

The stated goals of Parents Anonymous® are to eliminate risk factors such as parents' unrealistic expectations of children, parents' negative attitudes toward their children, and low parenting competence while enhancing protective factors such as self-esteem, parenting skills, and social support. Further, the program aims to strengthen families through helping parents create healthy parent-child relationships, use positive discipline methods, seek information and support, and learn to advocate for children.

The Parents in the Study

The sample included 206 parents new to Parents Anonymous®. These parents represented 54 Parents Anonymous® groups from 19 states. The sample was 91% female, 48% African American, 42% White, and 79% high school graduates ranging in age from 19 to 62 years (mean=35; sd=9.8). The parents had an average of 2.5 children (sd=1.39). Parents attended an average of 8 meetings (sd=8.05) during the six-month study period.

At the start of the study, the parents in the sample reported a fair number of parenting-related needs: half had no other adult caretaker living with them, half reported having at least one special needs child, half noted a history of physical or mental illness, and a fifth reported a history of substance abuse. About a quarter of participants reported a child protective services (CPS) allegation against them at some time prior to the study; 21% of these allegations were substantiated.

Most evaluated themselves as needing assistance with the practice of parenting. Almost three-quarters indicated they had sought help for their parenting issues prior to joining Parents Anonymous®. The vast majority (85%) attended Parents Anonymous® on their own accord, while 15% were mandated to attend meetings by child welfare authorities.

Despite the many needs reported by the parents in the study, average initial scores on the study measures did not indicate a particularly high risk of child maltreatment. For instance, at the start of the study, the parents as a whole reported little abusive behavior towards their children. On the scales for psychological aggression and physical aggression, the average scores indicated the vast majority of parents used such tactics less than once a month if at all. The average scores on the risk and protective factors measured were similarly "healthy."

Parents reported that the key reasons they started attending Parents Anonymous® included learning to be a better parent, meeting other parents (reducing isolation), and coping with the stresses of parenting and of life in general.

Study Methods

Parents attending Parents Anonymous® for the first time were eligible for recruitment. The 206 parents were interviewed three times. The first interview occurred as soon as possible after their initial meeting. The second interview was one month after the first; the third interview was six months after the first. The one-hour structured interviews had mainly quantitative but some qualitative items. Data collection began in August, 2003.¹

Sixteen study measures were administered at each interview. Each measure assesses an indicator of potential child maltreatment or a risk or protective factor associated with maltreatment. Each measure was based on published scales with proven reliability and validity in child maltreatment research. The four measures of child maltreatment outcomes were the primary outcome measures in the study.

Change in study measures was assessed in the short term (one month) and in the long term (six months) using t-tests. Most analyses included only the n=188 parents who continued attending meetings throughout the study.²

Quantitative findings reported here were either “statistically significant” at p<.05 or non-statistically significant “trends.”

Measures of Child Maltreatment Outcomes

Parenting distress--personal adjustment problems that can increase likelihood of child abuse.

Parenting rigidity--an attitude that children need strict rules and “should be seen but not heard.” Parents with high parenting rigidity are more likely to aggressively enforce those rules in ways that may be abusive.

Psychological and Physical Aggression Towards Children--the frequencies of threatened or active aggression towards one’s children. These are not necessarily measures of abuse but rather a tendency towards aggression and potential maltreatment.

Measures of Risk Factors

Life Stress

Parenting Stress

Emotional Violence and Physical Violence between Intimate Partners

Alcohol and Drug Use

Measures of Protective Factors

Quality of Life—one’s level of satisfaction with aspects of life, such as personal safety, family responsibilities, independence, and health.

Social Support—how much the people closest to the parent provide emotional support, help with an illness, and are generally available.

Parenting Sense of Competence—one’s confidence and satisfaction with issues of parenting and child behavior.

Nonviolent Discipline Tactics—the frequency of use of “positive parenting” techniques considered to be alternatives to corporal punishment.

Family Functioning—the extent of communication, support, and closeness among family members.

¹ This project was funded by the US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The full report including literature review, study methods and detailed findings is available in the publications section of www.nccd-crc.org.

² The 18 parents who completed all three interviews but did not attend any meetings after the first interview were used only in the analyses of parents who continued versus parents who dropped out.

KEY FINDINGS

Parents showed a strong pattern of reduction in child maltreatment outcomes over time.

At both one month and six months, improvement was found on all four of the key child maltreatment outcomes, with statistical significance on three: parenting distress, parenting rigidity, and the use of psychological aggression when disciplining children.

Parents showed a consistent pattern of reducing risk factors over time.

Trends showed improvement in every risk factor and half of protective factors. Parents indicated a statistically significant reduction in four of six risk factors measured: they showed less life stress, less drug and alcohol use, and less psychological aggression among intimate partners. Parents indicated a statistically significant improvement in one protective factor: an increase in their quality of life.

Parents who continued in Parents Anonymous® showed consistent improvement, while parents who stopped attending meetings showed very little improvement.

Parents who stopped attending Parents Anonymous® meetings after the first interview showed almost no change over time compared to the strong patterns of positive change shown by the group who continued attending Parents Anonymous® throughout the study period. Overall, parents who continued attending meetings through the six-month study period showed statistically significant improvement on 8 of the 16 measures, including parenting distress, rigidity, psychological aggression towards children, life stress, intimate partner violence, alcohol and drug abuse and quality of life.. In contrast, parents who stopped attending meetings after the first interview indicated significant change on just one measure, a reduction in life stresses.

These findings cannot be explained by pre-study differences; the group that continued and the one that

Short-Term and Long-Term Change on All Study Measures (n=188)

Table Key:

- ✓ = Statistically significant improvement (p<.05).
- + = Improvement trend without statistical significance.
- = Worsening (p<.05 for nonviolent tactics only).

	Short Term (1 month)	Long Term (6 months)
Child Maltreatment Outcomes		
Parenting Distress	✓	✓
Parenting Rigidity	✓	✓
Psychological Aggression	✓	✓
Physical Aggression	+	+
Risk Factors		
Life Stress	✓	✓
Parental Stress	+	+
Intimate Partner Emotional Violence	+	✓
Intimate Partner Physical Violence	+	+
Alcohol Abuse	✓	✓
Drug Abuse	+	✓
Protective Factors		
Quality of Life	✓	+
Social Support – Emot & Instrum	+	+
Social Support – General	+	+
Parenting Sense of Competence	--	--
Nonviolent Discipline Tactics	--	--
Family Functioning	--	--

did not were not statistically different on any demographics, background characteristics, or study measures at the start of the study. This is perhaps the strongest evidence in this study that the improvements demonstrated over time were largely the effect of the Parents Anonymous® intervention.

Parents starting the study with particularly serious needs showed improvement on those needs.

When the parents with the highest risk of child maltreatment at the start of the study were analyzed separately from the overall sample, improvement was found on every measure. These separate analyses showed that parents with a particularly strong need in a certain area (usually defined as being among the “worst” 25% of all parents on that scale at the first interview) *always* showed statistically significant improvement in that area. This was true for both one month and six months, with the sole exception of parenting rigidity at one month.

Importantly, these findings show that some positive impacts may have been hidden in the analysis of the overall sample. For example, the separate analysis revealed that those parents most likely to use physical aggression toward their children at the start of the study showed statistically significant improvement on that scale even though the sample overall did not. Similar phenomena were found for parental stress, physical and emotional domestic violence, drug abuse, and quality of life.

Trends in scores for three protective factors actually dropped over the course of the study when considering the entire sample of parents. Such decreases—in nonviolent tactics, parenting sense of competence and family functioning—would suggest parents were losing rather than building those protective factors (see further consideration of protective factors below). However, the parents who started the study in the lowest 25% for each of those three measures showed statistically significant improvement in both the short and long term on each measure. Once again, the parents with the most need in those areas appear to have benefitted the most.

One-month and six-month improvement

The evaluation literature includes many studies in which interventions produced immediate impacts that did not necessarily last over a longer period. The one- and six-month intervals studied here are not adequate follow-up periods to identify all possible effects of the

intervention or how effects change over time. Nevertheless, as reported above, these Parents Anonymous® parents demonstrated significant improvement at both intervals. Further, parents showed *both* one- and six-month improvement on five measures, indicating initial one-month impacts were sustained or improved upon over the six-month study period.

CPS allegations

Forty-eight parents (23%) indicated having a CPS allegation against them at some time prior to the first interview. The charges were substantiated for 21%, dropped for 72%, and still pending for 6%.

Eight parents (4%) reported having a CPS allegation made against them during the course of the study; two were substantiated, and one was still pending. Too few parents reported CPS contact during the course of the study, especially with substantiated allegations, to justify statistical analysis.

When grouped by background characteristics, all types of parents showed at least some improvement and certain types showed very consistent improvement.

When the various types of parents were grouped by their demographic and background information and analyzed separately, all showed statistically significant improvement on at least one study measure, and most showed such improvement on several measures.

Groups that showed the most consistent improvement included women, high school graduates, help-seekers,

parents with other child caretakers at home, parents earning \$13,000 or more, and parents with a CPS history. Conversely, men, parents with less than a high school education, parents with a history of substance abuse, and parents under a mandate to attend the program showed improvement on the fewest scales.

Change ($p < .05$) on Study Measures by Selected Parent Characteristics (n=188)

Table Key:

- ✓ = Statistically significant improvement ($p < .05$) in the short and/or long term.
- ✗ = Statistically significant worsening ($p < .05$) in the short and/or long term.

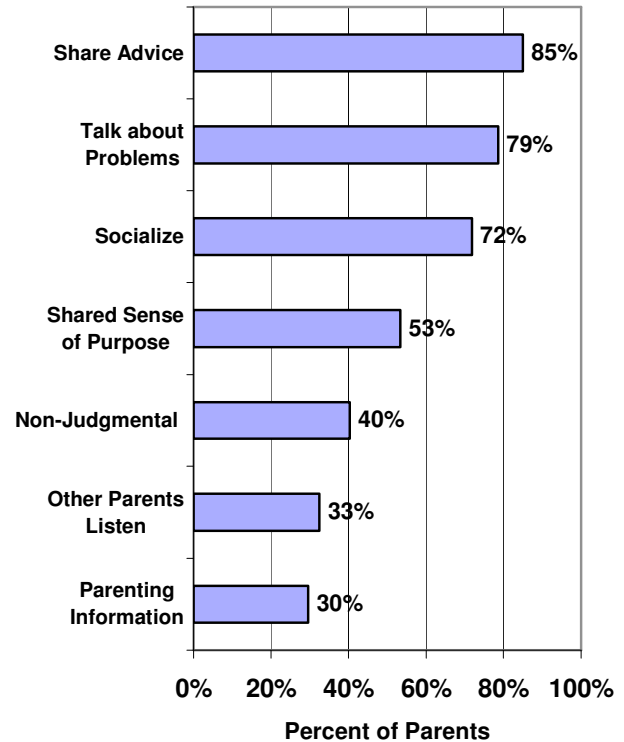
	Gender		Race			Education			Other caregivers in the household		Physical or mental illness history		History of CPS Allegations		Mandated attendance	
	Female	Male	African American	White	Other	Less than HS	Grad HS	Other caregivers	No other caregivers	Health Problems	No Health History	CPS Allegations	No CPS History	Mandated Attendance	Not Mandated	
N	169	19	92	79	17	43	142	93	95	92	96	51	137	27	156	
MALTREATMENT OUTCOMES																
Parenting Distress	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Parenting Rigidity	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
Psychological Aggression	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Physical Aggression																
RISK FACTORS																
Parental Stress								✓				✓				
Life Stress	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Intimate Partner Violence - Emotional	✓			✓					✓		✓	✓				✓
Intimate Partner Violence - Physical																
Alcohol Screen	✓		✓					✓			✓	✓				✓
Drug Screen	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			✓		✓			✓
PROTECTIVE FACTORS																
Quality of Life	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓			✓				
Social Support - Emotional & Instrum																
Social Support - General	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓					✓			
Parenting Sense of Competence			✗									✗		✗		
Nonviolent Discipline Tactics	✗	✗					✗		✗		✗		✗			✗
Family Functioning								✗			✗		✗			✗
Total scales with improvement ($p < .05$)	9	3	6	5	2	1	7	9	5	4	5	7	5	2	7	

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Parents’ qualitative self-report indicates a perception of strong positive change.

The quantitative findings were supported by the responses to the open-ended interview questions. When asked to describe how attending Parents Anonymous® meetings had affected their lives, parents were convinced of many positive impacts also related to risk and protective factors for child maltreatment—increased parenting skills and confidence, increased social support, even increased self-esteem. Over three-quarters indicated that parenting had become easier since they began attending Parents Anonymous® meetings and almost all reported Parents Anonymous® supplied them what they needed to raise their children well. Parenting-related problem solving, an understanding of child development, communication skills, and developing patience were the most commonly expressed improvements these parents felt their Parents Anonymous® experience had given them. Also, over three-quarters of these parents said they had formed relationships with other participants, and almost all of these spent time with group members outside of meetings. At the final interview, almost all (96%) indicated they planned to continue attending meetings.

What parents liked about attending Parents Anonymous® (N=206)*



*Participants were free to give multiple responses.

Qualitative Findings for Spanish-language Parents

In a separate segment of the study, 36 parents from Spanish-language Parents Anonymous® groups in two states were assessed with semi-structured, in-person, qualitative interviews.

Suffering from isolation, mental health issues, stress, and dysfunctional family life when they began attending meetings, the parents studied now enjoy more social support, better parenting practices, greater satisfaction with parenting, higher family functioning, and a higher sense of their own worth and capabilities. The impact of participation in Parents Anonymous® went beyond parenting practice to include emotional support and friendship outside of meetings. Parents particularly credited the emphasis in Parents Anonymous® meetings on confidentiality and respect, mutual support and shared leadership with their willingness to share, explore and resolve their personal problems.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Protective factors

The protective factors measured in the study did not show much statistically significant improvement for the parents as a whole or for most subgroups of parents. (An important exception was for those who started the study with the least of each type of protective factor measured, as discussed elsewhere.) Several factors may explain why there was little change on the protective factors measured. As with other measures, parents tended to score toward the healthiest extreme on the protective factor scales at the start of the study. It seems that these parents already had a strong base of protective factors and perhaps did not have much room for improvement. Further, protective factors generally attempt to measure underlying attitudes and perspectives that are reasonably expected to change only over longer period of times. Risk factor scales, in contrast, typically attempt to measure mood or specific behavioral change, such as stress or using or not using certain parenting techniques on a daily basis, constructs more likely to change in a matter of weeks or a few months.

Social support

Building social support among its parent participants is a key element of the Parents Anonymous® strategy for reducing child maltreatment. While parents overall did not, parents who started the study in the bottom quartile of social support did show statistically significant improvement at both the second and third interview. And there was strong qualitative evidence that participating parents highly valued the social support of other parents: 72% said they valued the social aspect of the meetings and 54% the shared sense of purpose—camaraderie, support, and sense of community—they had with the other parents. Also, the social support from program attendance was extremely important to the parents interviewed in the Spanish-language segment of the study. Many indicated that it took some time for them to grow accustomed to the meetings, to trust the other parents, and to fully embrace the process, but they all eventually did fully commit and were reaping the benefits.

Nonviolent discipline tactics

The complex etiology of child abuse speaks both to the difficulty in assessing the effects of interventions as well as the difficulty in measuring and interpreting parental behavior. This study operationalized nonviolent tactics as a protective factor. It was theorized that positive parenting techniques would supplant unhealthy, aggressive forms of discipline. If that were borne out, scores on nonviolent tactics would be expected to rise over time. However, it can also be theorized that, as risk and protective factors improve and a family begins to function in a healthier way, the need for any discipline, aggressive or not, would be reduced. This alternative explanation is supported by the authors of the scale on which the measure was based.³ They report that parents use a variety of strategies to address discipline issues and found that nonviolent tactics were correlated with more aggressive tactics. The actual findings in the current study went both ways: nonviolent tactics scores dropped overall, but rose for those parents who used them the least at the start of the study. Parents may have reduced the time they spent disciplining overall, while parents who did not have positive parenting techniques as part of their approach to discipline seem to have learned how to incorporate them through their Parents Anonymous® attendance.

Parents most at risk

At the start of the study, some parents in the sample had a higher risk of child maltreatment as indicated by their initial scores on study measures and by their background characteristics. As reported above, *all of these subgroups found benefit in attending Parents Anonymous®*. Since the sample included only parents new to Parents Anonymous®, they may have been in a particular crisis at the time of the first interview that might be expected to lesson over time, with or without intervention. But it is equally possible the crisis would

³ Straus, M. A., Hamby, S.L., Finkelhor, D., Moore, D.W., Runyan, D. 1998. Identification of Child Maltreatment with the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales: Development and Psychometric Data for a National Sample of American Parents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 4, 249-270.

continue or that new crises would develop, especially over a six-month period. The consistency of the findings of improvement across the various study measures is strong evidence that Parents Anonymous® attendance facilitated the reduced risk of maltreatment in those parents most in need of help.

Study strengths and limitations

The methodology for this study had several strengths:

- the use of a national sample,
- measures based on published standardized scales,
- methods informed by a prior process evaluation.⁴

Besides the benefits of Parents Anonymous® involvement, other factors may have contributed to the study findings for the sample overall and for the most at-risk parents. Participation in the study was on a volunteer basis. It is conceivable that a parent likely to volunteer for a study may be more likely to benefit from the program; for instance, he may be more readily trusting or more open to sharing, while a non-volunteer may be more guarded or need more time to adjust.

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CONCLUSION

This study shows that Parents Anonymous® is a promising program for the reduction of child abuse and neglect.

Statistically significant improvement was found in every broad category of risk factors studied—parenting distress, parenting rigidity, aggression toward children, stress, domestic violence and substance abuse.

Improvement was found in half of the protective factors studied, one to a statistically significant level.

All types of parents found at least some benefit.

Benefit was especially consistent for those parents most in need on each measure.

Of those measures showing an overall drop or worsening, only one was statistically significant and the interpretation of that one finding is, in fact, unclear.

The broad-based approach to family strengthening offered by Parents Anonymous® appeared to allow the parents in the sample to address their most pressing needs at the same time as providing a safety net, buffering the impact of the process of change across other factors.

Parents Anonymous® seems to allow parents with differing backgrounds and differing needs to address and solve their particular issues. Further, with all of the qualitative interviewees and 96% of the quantitative interviewees reporting that they planned to continue attending, Parents Anonymous® enjoys a loyal and enthusiastic following.

⁴ This study was informed by a year-long NCCD process evaluation, which helped to define research goals and objectives, develop data collection instruments, and facilitate sampling. The report submitted to OJJDP is available at www.nccd-crc.org.