



The Role of Parent Mutual Support

Parent mutual self-help support groups play an active role in strengthening families. In group settings, families find support and gain information, both of which help parents develop resilience and the ability to better handle life's stressful events. The premise of parent mutual self-help support groups is that they help promote protective factors.

Through its Strengthening Families Initiative, the Center for the Study of Social Policy has determined that there are five protective factors paramount in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. As adapted by the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Program (CBCAP), these five protective factors are:

- nurturing and attachment of the children
- knowledge of effective parenting
- knowledge of child and youth development
- parental resilience
- social connections and solid support for parents

Parent mutual self-help support groups adhere to these five guidelines in their core philosophy and have gained national recognition in the campaign to prevent child abuse and neglect. Over the past four decades, research on risk factors and conditions associated with child abuse and neglect have pointed to the need for social support and the benefits that a parent support group can provide. (Falconer, 2006; Pion-Berlin and Kolinsky, 2000).

There are many justifications for parent support groups. Parent self-help support groups encourage families to interact with their neighbors and within their communities which is instrumental in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. A goal of parent support groups is to empower participants, and parents with a healthy mental outlook have a lower risk of child abuse and neglect. Support groups are logistically versatile, because they can be offered in conjunction with other programs that focus on the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and implementation costs can be low. Parent mutual support groups are inclusive, embracing fathers, grandparents,

and other relatives who help care for children. The groups can address many challenges for parents, such as caring for children with special needs, addressing substance abuse problems, or—most recently—responding constructively to the aftermath of natural disasters (Falconer, 2006; Gay, 2005).

Congress recognized the value of parent mutual support groups in the legislation authorizing CBCAP, which identifies parent mutual support as one of the core child abuse and neglect prevention services that state lead agencies are to fund. A significant number of state CBCAP programs are funding parent mutual support programs as stand-alone efforts or as part of more comprehensive strategies (FRIENDS, 2007).

Models of Mutual Self-Help Support Groups

Nationally, two models of parent mutual self-help support groups have demonstrated that such groups can promote *protective factors* and reduce *risk factors*, helping to strengthen families and protect children: Parents Anonymous, Inc.®, and Circle of Parents, Inc. Both also promote the principles of *shared leadership* and *parent leadership*.

The Parents Anonymous® and Circle of Parents models are based on practices that are parent-centered, parent-led, and parent-driven and are guided by the following principles:

- parent mutual self-help support that is ongoing
- support to address current family issues during support group meetings
- positive parenting skills and healthy parent-child relationships
- connection to valuable community services and support for the well-being of families and children
- effective partnerships between practitioners and parents to strengthen families and children

- parent leadership promoted within the support group, in the community, and at state and national levels

What the Research Shows

Current research finds a number of positive benefits of parent mutual support.

Recent research by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, found reduced child maltreatment, reduced risk factors, and increased protective factors among a nationally representative sample of parents who participated in Parents Anonymous® groups over a six-month period. Parents Anonymous® is the nation’s oldest child abuse prevention organization; it has 267 accredited organizations and local affiliates and an evidence-based program to help prevent child abuse and neglect (NCCD, 2007).

Statistically significant results of the study are:

Reduced Child Maltreatment Outcomes:

- 73% of parents decreased their distress
- 65% of parents decreased their rigidity
- 56% of parents reduced use of psychological aggression towards their children
- for parents who reported using physical aggression, 83% stopped physically abusing their children

Reduced Risk Factors:

- 86% of high-stressed parents reduced their parental stress
- 71% of parents reduced their life stressors
- 40% of parents reduced any form of domestic violence
- 32% of parents reduced their drug/alcohol use

Increased Protective Factors:

- 67% of parents improved their quality of life
- for parents starting out needing improvement, 90% improved in emotional and instrumental support
- 88% improved in parenting sense of competence
- 84% improved in general social support
- 69% improved in use of non-violent discipline tactics
- 67% improved in family functioning

Additionally, a qualitative study conducted with Hispanic/Latino parents confirmed these results. In summary, parents who continued to attend Parents Anonymous® groups over time showed improvement in child maltreatment outcomes and risk and protective factors compared to those who dropped out. Strong evidence suggests that parents benefit and strengthen their families through Parents Anonymous® regardless of the participant’s race, gender, education, or income.

Ongoing evaluations also have been conducted with parents attending Circle of Parents support groups in Florida, Minnesota, and Washington. In Florida, participants in most parent support groups are surveyed each quarter using a retrospective pretest methodology. All measures are based on self-reports by parent participants. In Minnesota, Circle of Parent participants are surveyed once a year. The research design is longitudinal and allows measurement of changes in parenting behaviors across multiple years. In Washington, as in Florida, the surveys are “slice-in-time” surveys that combine pre-measures and post-measures in one tool (Falconer, 2006)

In one overall assessment, similar performance outcomes were compared across all three states.

	Florida	Washington
Percentage of participants who improved the quality of the parent/child relationship	67.6%	72%
Percentage of participants who improved their parenting skills	74.5%	78%
Percentage of participants who improved their support system awareness and use	70.1%	71%

In Florida’s 2005-2006 evaluation of the Florida Ounce of Prevention’s Circle of Parents program, 79.9% of participants improved their self-management skills (Minnesota and Washington did not assess this outcome in their latest evaluation). Minnesota reported statistically significant improvements among participants in their quality of the parent/child relationships, and in parenting skills (Ibid). In both Florida and Washington, as the number of support group sessions attended

increased, the percentage of participants who improved for each protective factor outcome measure also increased (Ibid.).

Finally, additional research conducted at Wichita State University in collaboration with the Kansas Children's Service League found that Latino families living in rural areas where they face language barriers, isolation, and few support systems benefit from parent mutual self-help support groups. A hundred and eighteen members of Parents Helping Parents (PHP) groups in seven rural counties in Kansas were surveyed. Their responses indicate they rely on the support group for information and support for parenting. Among protective factors, 78% of participants said they received information on child development, 74% indicated an increase in positive parenting skills, and 86% gained information on how to cope with difficult life situations (Wituk, et al, 2001).

Additional small-scale evaluations have been conducted on other free-standing programs. For example, a New York City program for grandparent caregivers of children with disabilities held six group sessions for study participants. A wait-list control group was offered the intervention post-test assessment three months after the intervention for the treatment group. Compared with the control group, the experimental group recorded a decrease in depressive symptoms, an increase in family empowerment, and an improvement in grandparents' sense of caregiving (McCallion, Janicki, and Kolomer, 2004).

Conclusion

Overall, parent mutual self-help support groups are effective in helping to increase protective factors in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Through the concepts of shared leadership and parent leadership, parents become empowered to actively promote the well-being of their families and to seek out and advocate for resources in their communities. Through parent involvement in support groups, parents begin to develop relationships in their communities, which connect them to the support and services they need to enhance the quality of life for themselves and their children.

Resources

Parents Anonymous, Inc.: <http://www.parentsanonymous.org>
Circle of Parents: <http://www.circleofparents.org/>

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