

Early parental program improves long-term childhood outcomes

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

Children whose parents participated in a prenatal program aimed at enhancing couples' co-parenting relationship were better adjusted at age seven than children whose parents were assigned to a control group, according to Penn State researchers.

Teachers reported significantly better adjustment and positive school engagement among children whose [parents](#) received the intervention than in the control children, the researchers reported in the current issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

"The Family Foundations program focuses on fostering positive co-parenting—that is, more cooperative and supportive teamwork between parents—because research shows such co-parenting can benefit children in many ways," said Mark E. Feinberg, research professor of health and [human development](#) and senior scientist at the Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development. "Parents who have better co-parenting relations feel more supported and confident, less stressed and depressed and they show more warmth and patience with their children."

Parents who argue and are often in conflict with each other over parenting issues can become more impatient and harsh with their children, according to Feinberg. Even if parents don't take out frustration on their children, the emotional security and well-being of the child can be threatened by the presence of conflict in the home.

"We hypothesized that all of these factors—better co-parenting, better parenting, better child adjustment—can lead to better school outcomes, as they enhance a child's ability to cooperate with peers and teachers, avoid distractions and focus on schoolwork," said Feinberg.

Ten years ago, Feinberg received funding from the National Institutes of Health to develop and test an educational and preventive program, Family Foundations, offering a series of classes for expectant parents. The program focuses on how a first-time expectant couple can prepare for a new baby together, developing new skills and perspectives helpful in raising a child.

In the current study, about 80 families responded to a questionnaire when their child was between five and seven years old. Half of these families had originally been assigned to the intervention program, while the other half were assigned to the [control group](#). Parents were asked to answer questions about their child's behavior, including how often the child lost his temper, whether he was depressed and how often he fought with other children. Each child's teacher was also surveyed about the child's adjustment and adaptation to school.

"It is important to note that this was a 'universal' study that enrolled all couples expecting a first child, rather than a targeted intervention that focused on couples at high-risk due to poverty, low education, young age or other factors," said Feinberg. "Some programs have been shown to be effective in supporting very high-risk pregnant mothers. But few, if any, programs focused on all expecting couples have shown long-term benefits for children.

"The transition to parenthood is stressful for most parents, and most couples experience greater conflict and less romance after the birth of a first child. Levels of depression and anxiety are high for new parents, and levels of family violence seem to be highest for families with [young children](#). Showing that we can support all couples making the transition to parenthood with long-term benefits for their children is a new finding for the field and offers a new means of supporting families with young children."

The researchers noted that while the preventive program showed stronger results for families at higher risk for distress prior to the intervention, it had a positive effect for all families. However, further research and study replication is needed.

"We now have evidence that this program enhances [child](#) adjustment over a long period of time, both at home and school," said Feinberg.

"These new findings build on prior evidence that the program reduces parent depression and anxiety, improves parenting quality, and enhances young [children](#)'s self-regulation. We even have evidence that the program reduces adverse birth outcomes and shortens hospital stays for some families. The breadth and depth of proven benefits for families has persuaded the Department of Defense to disseminate the program to military families.

"The key now to getting this program out into the civilian world will be finding ways of financially supporting it, including reimbursement by health insurance, in order for communities to include this approach as part of the standard education and preparation for childbirth and parenthood."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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