

# The How-to Parenting Program improves the mental health of children

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While children of all ages will be heading back to school in a few days, a new study from the Université de Montréal may encourage their parents to return to the classroom themselves ... at least for a few evenings! The results of a study in developmental psychology published in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* show that the How-to Parenting Program improves the mental health of children.

"Did you know that certain ways of talking to your child are more effective? Certain ways of listening make a real difference?" These questions are asked to [parents](#) in the How-to Parenting Program. The program is consistent with the findings of recent scientific research in [developmental psychology](#) and is designed to help parents know how to react to the painful feelings of their children, cultivate a climate of respect in their homes, facilitate [cooperation](#) in their children, firmly express [disagreement](#) when necessary, and promote the development of a positive and realistic image in their children.

Funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec - Société et culture, psychology professors Mireille Joussemet and Geneviève Mageau of the Université de Montréal, and Richard Koestner of McGill University, conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of the program, whose original name is How to talk so kids will listen & listen so kids will talk. The free program is given at the child's school one evening per week for seven weeks.

A total of 30 parenting skills were taught by two group leaders, and six

common situations in daily living were addressed: when a child feels distressed, does not cooperate, misbehaves, could decide by himself/herself, does well, and is stuck in a role. Note that the program is not about the expression of affection or the amount of quality time spent with one's child, but how to communicate empathy, unconditional regard, and mutual respect.

The researchers met and interviewed 82 participating parents and their children (44) aged 8 to 12 years. The results of the study showed that there were significant improvements in parenting style and children's psychological adjustment. The three key dimensions of optimal parenting—structure, warmth, and autonomy support—showed a significant increase. The children also reported higher levels of well-being.

"This suggests that improving one's role as a parent can be taught and learned," says Geneviève Mageau, co-author of the study. "Following the program, we found that certain skills were developed, such as empathy. Among the positive results, we also noted a decrease in parental behaviours aimed at shaming children."

"While one of the aims is to improve the parent-child relationship, children did not seem to see a difference in their relationship with their parents immediately after the end of the program," says Mireille Joussemet, lead author of the study. "However, children felt better about themselves and had less emotional and behavioural problems. These results are encouraging and show that parenting education is effective."

"The most important limitation of the study was the absence of a control group," notes Mageau. "We were not able to account for the influence of other variables, such as the passage of time, on the improvement of the parent-child relationships. The next step is thus to conduct a larger-scale study with control groups to determine whether the beneficial effects on

the [mental health](#) of [children](#) are indeed a result of the program. Principals and parents who are interested may contact us at [info@nos-enfants.org](mailto:info@nos-enfants.org)."

**More information:** The study Promoting Optimal Parenting and Children's Mental Health: A Preliminary Evaluation of the How-to Parenting Program, by Mireille Joussemet, Geneviève Mageau, and Richard Koestner was pre-published online on the Web site of the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* and will be published in print in the next issue.

Provided by University of Montreal

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