

Abusive mothers improve their parenting after home visits, classes, emotional support from therapists

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Mothers who live in poverty and who have abused their children can stop if they are taught parenting skills and given emotional support.

A new study has found that mothers in families in which there is a history of child abuse and neglect were able to reduce how much they cursed at, yelled at, slapped, spanked, hit or rejected their [children](#) after a series of home visits from therapists who taught them [parenting skills](#).

There were large improvements in mothers' parenting in families that received the intensive services, compared to families that did not receive the services, according to SMU psychologists Ernest Jouriles and Renee McDonald at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, two of the study's eight authors.

As a result of the intensive, hands-on training, the women in the study said they felt they did a better job managing their children's behavior, said Jouriles and McDonald. The mothers also were observed to use better parenting strategies, and the families were less likely to be reported again for child abuse.

"Although there are many types of services for addressing child maltreatment, there is very little scientific data about whether the services actually work," said McDonald. "This study adds to our

scientific knowledge and shows that this type of service can actually work."

Help for violent families

The parenting training is part of a program called Project Support, developed at the Family Research Center at SMU and designed to help children in severely violent families.

The study was published in the June issue of the *Journal of [Family Psychology](#)*. The article is titled "Improving Parenting in Families Referred for Child Maltreatment: A [Randomized Controlled Trial](#) Examining Effects of Project Support." SMU psychologist David Rosenfield also authored the study.

The research was funded by the federal Interagency Consortium on Violence Against Women and Violence Within the Family, along with the Texas-based Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.

"Child maltreatment is such an important and costly problem in our society that it seems imperative to make sure that our efforts — and the tax dollars that pay for them — are actually solving the problem," said Jouriles. He and McDonald are co-founders and co-directors of the SMU Family Research Center.

In 2007, U.S. child welfare agencies received more than 3 million reports of child abuse and neglect, totaling almost 6 million children, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Poor and single with children

The SMU study worked with 35 families screened through the Texas

child welfare agency Child Protective Services, CPS. The [parents](#) had abused or neglected their children at least once, but CPS determined it best the family stay together and receive services to improve parenting and end the maltreatment.

In all the families, the mother was legal guardian and primary caregiver and typically had three children. On average she was 28, single and had an annual income of \$10,300. Children in the study ranged from 3 to 8 years old.

Half the families in the study received Project Support parenting education and support. The other half received CPS's conventional services.

New parenting skills + help

Mental health service providers met with the 17 Project Support families weekly in their homes for up to 6 months.

During that time, mothers, and often their husbands or partners, were taught 12 specific skills, including how to pay attention and play with their children, how to listen and comfort them, how to offer praise and positive attention, how to give appropriate instructions and commands, and how to respond to misbehavior.

Also, therapists provided the mothers with [emotional support](#) and helped them access materials and resources through community agencies as needed, such as food banks and Medicaid. The therapists also helped mothers evaluate the adequacy and safety of the family's living arrangements, the quality of their child-care arrangements and how to provide enough food with so little money.

Services provided to families receiving traditional child welfare services

varied widely. The range of services included parenting classes at a church or agency, family therapy or individual counseling, videotaped parenting instruction, anger-management help, GED classes and contact by social workers in person or by phone.

Fewer recurrences of abuse

Only 5.9 percent of the families trained through Project Support were later referred to CPS for abuse, compared with almost 28 percent of the control group, the researchers found.

"The results of this study have important implications for the field of child maltreatment," said SMU's Rosenfield.

Project Support was launched in 1996 to address the mental health problems of maltreated children and children exposed to domestic violence, both of which often lead to considerable problems for children later in life, such as substance abuse, interpersonal violence and criminal activity. Previous studies have shown the program can improve children's psychological adjustment as well as mothers' ability to parent their children appropriately and effectively, according to the researchers.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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