

Parenting classes benefit all, especially lower-income families

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Parenting education can improve the skills of every mom and dad and the behavior of all children, and it particularly benefits families from low-income or otherwise underserved populations, a new study from Oregon State University suggests.

Researchers examined a sample of more than 2,300 mothers and fathers who participated in parenting education series in the Pacific Northwest between 2010 and 2012. The series, designed to support parents of [children](#) up to 6 years old, typically lasted nine to 12 weeks and consisted of one one-hour session per week led by a parent education facilitator. There was no fee for participants.

The study, part of a growing partnership between the OSU College of Public Health and Human Sciences and the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative to increase access to parenting education for all families, may remove some of the stigma attached to parenting education, which has historically been associated with court orders for parents who've run afoul of child-protective laws.

"Parenting education works across the board," said John Geldhof, an OSU assistant professor of behavioral and health sciences. "All parents can benefit. The way people typically learn parenting is from their parents and from books, and often times what they've learned is out of date and not the best practices for today. All parents - high income, low income, mandated, not mandated - can benefit from evidence-based parenting education."

Neglectful or otherwise ineffective parenting strategies, which can be heightened by economic strain, can put children in jeopardy. While many [parenting practices](#) can lead to favorable outcomes in children, research indicates that the optimal combination usually features high levels of support and monitoring and the avoidance of harsh punishment. Those positive outcomes include higher grades, fewer behavior problems, less substance use, better mental health and greater social competence.

Findings of the OSU research, recently published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, indicate that parent education series serving predominantly lower-income parents resulted in greater improvements in their skills and their children's behaviors compared to series serving higher-income parents.

"The results provide preliminary evidence that parenting education may be most effective when it targets underserved populations," said lead author Jennifer Finders, a graduate student in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "Another thing that's exciting - the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative classes that are offered are general in content, and we're seeing evidence that they're being adapted for diverse families. This suggests that the local parenting educators are implementing the programs with fidelity and also with flexibility."

Finders called the results "really great preliminary findings."

"Now we need to better understand the mechanisms that underlie the findings so we can tailor programs to specific families in exciting ways for research and for practice," she said. "This highlights the need for future research that continues to involve the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative and other researchers at OSU and elsewhere. We think parents are gaining knowledge of child development, tools for dealing with the stresses of parenting, and social networks."

The collaborative includes among its leadership Shauna Tominey, assistant professor of practice and parenting education specialist at OSU's Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children & Families, part of the College of Public Health and Human Sciences. The parenting education series the collaborative offers are delivered at no cost to the [parents](#).

"Given that the gap is widening between the white, middle-class population of children and children belonging to the growing low-income and Latino populations, examining the relative impact of parenting education programs across these diverse populations is essential," Finders said. "We think [parenting education](#) can have the greatest impact by adapting existing curricula to be culturally relevant and sensitive to diverse children and families' needs."

More information: Jennifer K. Finders et al, The impact of parenting education on parent and child behaviors: Moderators by income and ethnicity, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2016.11.006](#)

Provided by Oregon State University

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