



# Implementation of a Parenting Skills Program for Parents Currently on Probation for Substance Use.

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## Introduction

Effective parenting skills are essential in building healthy parent-child relationships. In turn, healthy relationships aid children in developing appropriate pro-social behaviors and lessen the need for harsh discipline tactics (McMahon & Forehand, 2005). In addition, research indicates that ineffective parenting is a risk factor for the development of challenging behaviors in children (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Thus, parenting programs that aid parents in learning, understanding, and implementing effective parenting strategies are likely to support the healthy development of their children.

Research indicates that parenting programs are successful in improving family functioning and increasing children's emotional and behavioral adjustment (e.g., Dretzke et al., 2006). In a review of the literature, Kane, Wood, and Barlow (2007) ascertained that effective parenting programs provided education about effective behavior management techniques and coping skills and offered a non-judgmental environment where parents could receive support. Blackmore and Jewell (2004) concluded that child development, behavior and discipline, communication, and emotional wellbeing were four core components for successful parenting programs. Parenting programs have been implemented in a number of settings including schools, rehabilitation centers, and counseling centers (Kane, Wood, & Barlow, 2007) and have been designed to serve a variety of populations including biological and foster parents (Puddy & Jackson, 2003) and incarcerated parents (Lange, 2001). Recently parents on probation for substance abuse has received attention as a target group for parenting interventions (Luthar, Suchman, & Altmare, 2007; Salveron, Lewig, & Arney, 2009). Children of substance abusing parents are at a higher risk for child abuse and neglect (Kumpfer and Bays, 1995), and some of them have lost custody of their children. Parental substance abuse can be damaging to the parent-child relationship and often complicates reunification. These realities argue for incorporating programs focused on rebuilding the parent-child relationship into probation requirements. There is some evidence to suggest that programs that include parenting techniques benefit parents' continued sobriety because of the coping skills and support they offer (Salveron, Lewig, & Arney, 2009). Additionally such programs have the potential to decrease child maltreatment and improve emotional adjustment for children.

The current study was a preliminary evaluation of a parenting skills program for parents currently on probation for prior substance abuse. Specific examination of parents' perceived ability and competency as a parent was conducted. Additionally, parents' overall evaluation of and satisfaction with the program was assessed.

## Methods

### Participants

The initial parenting skills group consisted of four female participants currently on probation for substance abuse in a Midwestern Community. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 44 years ( $M = 34.25$ ,  $SD = 8.26$ ) and all identified as European American. On average, participants had 3 children each, ranging in age from 6 to 17 years ( $M = 11.67$ ,  $SD = 3.77$ ) with 81.8% of the children being male.

### Measures

**Parenting Stress Index (PSI;** Abidin, 1995). The PSI is a 120 item assessment that identifies stressors experienced by parents that are related to dysfunctional parenting. For the purpose of the current study, the Restriction of Role and Sense of Competence Subscales were utilized.

**Parenting Questionnaire.** This questionnaire was developed specifically for the parenting skills program and was designed to assess parents' current interactions with their children and parental responses to their children's needs and demands. In addition, parents reported on their own feelings about their children's ability to manage behaviors and emotions.

**Parenting Skills Program Evaluation.** This evaluation was developed specifically for the parenting skills program and was designed to assess parents' experience with the program. Questions addressed on the evaluation correspond to session content, group facilitators, and overall satisfaction.

Table 1. Session Summary of Parenting Skills Group

Session Title	Summary of Session
<b>1. Introduction to the Parenting Skills Group</b>	The purpose of the introduction session of the parenting skills group is to build rapport with the parents of the group, establish group rules, and discuss confidentiality. In addition, this session focuses on discussing the parents' expectations of group and correcting any misconceptions. Finally, this session includes a brief discussion of the parents' likes and dislikes about being a parent and ways of building a positive and supportive relationship with their children.
<b>2. Building a Positive and Supportive Relationship with your Child</b>	The second session begins with a discussion of importance of attachment, how parents feel about their current relationship with their child, and factors that have impacted their relationship. Additionally, information is provided on skills to build a positive and supportive relationship reflecting the developmental age of the child including praising children for positive behaviors and providing children with support including supportive listening.
<b>3. Learning to Communicate with your Child</b>	The third session focuses on effective communication with children. Common pitfalls parents experience when communicating with their children are discussed. Strategies are provided to help parents more effectively communicate with their children including reflective listening, being empathetic, and acknowledging their feelings. Further, the importance of talking about difficult issues, including sex education and substance use, with their children is discussed and effective communication strategies for these issues are provided.
<b>4. Learning to Resolve Conflicts with your Child</b>	The fourth session focuses on reviewing effective communication and introduces resolving conflicts with children. Common pitfalls parents experience when resolving problems with their children are discussed. Strategies are provided to help parents learn how to effectively resolve conflict with children including cooperation and problem solving. Additionally, issues related to building children's self-esteem are covered including praising positive behaviors and encouraging autonomy.
<b>5. Establishing Structure and Routines at Home</b>	The fifth session helps parents to establish structure and routines in the home. The importance of consistency in healthy development and how establishing structure and routines helps provide consistency is addressed. Along with this, the importance of household rules in decreasing challenging behaviors is discussed. Strategies for establishing structure and routines are introduced and examples are provided of possible activities to incorporate into daily routines. Additionally, the importance of establishing good sleep hygiene is covered.
<b>6. Home Safety and Supervision</b>	The sixth session focuses on the importance of establishing safety and appropriate supervision in the home. Strategies for developing home safety and steps to provide appropriate supervision are introduced. Additionally, barriers to establishing safety in the environment and providing appropriate supervision are discussed along with brainstorming solutions to these barriers. Finally, this session includes information regarding the impact of exposure to violence and inappropriate behaviors on children.
<b>7. The Importance of Health Care and Nutrition</b>	The seventh session is designed to help parents identify ways to ensure that children eat a nutritious diet, stay healthy, and receive proper medical care. Information is provided on components of a healthy diet, planning nutritious meals, making healthy choices when eating out of the home, ensuring that children get enough exercise, and encouraging children to make healthy choices independently. Additionally, information is provided on teenage dieting and prevention of eating disorders. Issues related to medical neglect and failure to thrive are also addressed.
<b>8. Ineffective Discipline Strategies</b>	The focus of the eighth session is to discuss ineffective discipline strategies. The types of discipline strategies parents use, including what has and has not worked, are covered. Additionally, information on why children misbehave is provided. This session will also focus on the importance of consistency and follow through with discipline and understanding children's development when using discipline. Finally, empirical evidence behind the reasoning that spanking is an ineffective and potentially harmful discipline strategy is discussed.
<b>9. Effective Discipline Strategies</b>	The aim of the ninth session is to discuss effective strategies for discipline including ignoring, giving effective commands, and the use of privileges. The importance of effective communication, building a positive relationship with children, and consistency and follow through is reviewed. Developmentally appropriate strategies will also be discussed such as sticker charts and time out for younger children and grounding, job cards, and behavioral contracts for older children.
<b>10. Practice Implementing Effective Discipline Strategies</b>	The tenth session is designed to continue discussion of effective discipline strategies and give the parents an opportunity to practice implementing and following through with different discipline strategies. Parents are also provided with an opportunity to brainstorm discipline strategies specific to their child's needs, taking into consideration development and age of their children. Solutions to problems or concerns the parents have with implementing skills at home is discussed.
<b>11. Issues Faced with Co-Parenting</b>	The eleventh session focuses on co-parenting issues faced by parents. Group facilitators help parents identify successful strategies they have used when dealing with co-parenting issues in the past and problem solve through co-parenting situations that have been difficult. Strategies for dealing with differences in parenting styles and for communicating with the other parent will be provided including assertive communication, conflict management, stress reduction, appropriate language usage, and positive communication. Helping children adjust to situations such as divorce or separation is covered.
<b>12. Putting it all Together – Review of Parenting Skills</b>	The twelfth session is the final session and includes a review of each of the previous 11 sessions. Parents will be asked to provide feedback about the group, such as what they liked or disliked about the group and ways the group could be improved. As each weekly topic is reviewed, discussion is facilitated by asking parents what they remember from each week, what skills they have tried to use from each week, challenges they have faced while practicing new parenting skills, and successes they have had in using the information covered in group. Parents are also provided with community resources for help when dealing with parenting issues in the future.

## Procedures

The parenting skills program was held at a probation facility and occurred once a week for twelve weeks with each session lasting sixty minutes. The program was facilitated by two doctoral-level clinical psychology students from the local university. As part of their requirements for completing their probation sentence, participants were obligated to attend a minimum of 10 sessions which all participants successfully accomplished. Session content of the program included building rapport, enhancing the parent-child relationship, communication, home safety, establishing routines, effective discipline, and co-parenting. Table 1 shows a brief description of each session.

Prior to the beginning of the parenting skills program, participants completed the Parenting Questionnaire along with a modification of the PSI that incorporated all questions related to the Restriction of Roles and Sense of Competence subscales. At the end of the 12 sessions of the parenting group, participants again completed the PSI and Parenting Questionnaire along with a final evaluation of their experience with the program.

## Results

All participants completed the program. This is notable because, even though the program was required, it is common for probationers at this facility to end programs prematurely. For instance, one participant reported that this was the first program she had successfully completed during her time on probation because it was important to her current situation.

Although there were too few participants to examine significance, trends of the PSI subscales and Parenting Questionnaire proved promising. Regarding the PSI subscales, Restriction of Role decreased from pre-treatment ( $M = 20.67$ ) to post-treatment ( $M = 18.66$ ) and Sense of Competence increased from pre-treatment ( $M = 25.00$ ) to post-treatment ( $M = 33.00$ ).

On the Parenting Questionnaire lower scores are indicative of improvement. As such, parents reported a trend of more positive interactions with children from pre-treatment ( $M = 47.33$ ) to post-treatment ( $M = 45.00$ ). Additionally, parents reported a trend of improved confidence in their ability as a parent from pre-treatment ( $M = 44.333$ ) to post-treatment ( $M = 41.66$ ).

Finally, feedback from parents on a program evaluation questionnaire indicated that all participants believed the information they learned was useful. The majority were happy with their experience and would recommend the class to others. All the parents reported the things they liked most about group were interacting with others in the same situation and the manner in which the group was structured and facilitated. Additionally, parents agreed that having knowledgeable facilitators who were capable of explaining the material appropriately was beneficial.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to provide preliminary evaluation of a parenting skills program for parents currently on probation for substance use. The population of parents with substance abuse histories who are on probation is an important focus for such programs due to child maltreatment issues caused by substance use and possible damage to the parent-child relationship (Luthar, Suchman, & Altmare, 2007; Salveron, Lewig, & Arney, 2009). Evaluation of the data showed promising trends providing support for the implementation of the parenting skills program. Specifically, parents reported feeling less restricted in their role and more competent as a parent upon completion of the program. Additionally, parents noted feeling more confident in their ability as parents and endorsed more positive interactions with their children since the beginning of the program.

These results suggest that parenting programs targeted to similar groups have the potential to increase parental perceptions of competence, parents' confidence in the parental role, and their motivation to establish and maintain positive relationships with their children. As discussed previously, positive parent-child interactions are critical in helping children develop appropriate pro-social behaviors (McMahon & Forehand, 2005) and lessen the risk for the development of challenging behaviors (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Given that this study is a preliminary evaluation of a parenting skills program, future studies should incorporate a larger sample size and include additional assessments such as parental knowledge, treatment adherence, and skills demonstration. Ultimately, data regarding CPS involvement and loss of custody should be examined in relationship to the knowledge, skill levels, and coping mechanisms of parents who have been on probation related to substance abuse issues.