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Maria Elena Falcon
mfalcon@dons.usfca.edu

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Promoting parent-child relationships through community-based family wellness programs
to improve mental health in children.

MariaElena Falcon
School of Nursing and Health Professions, University of San Francisco
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Dr. Trinette Radasa
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Abstract

**Objective:** Adverse childhood experiences can affect a child mentally and lead to mental, health, and learning problems later in life. Establishing healthy parent-child relationships through family-oriented programs can promote mental well-being, improve behavior and learning in children, and strengthen positive parent-child relationships.

**Methods:** A systematic electronic search using databases Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PubMed, and PsycINFO, contextualized current research on the importance of parent-child relationships and their influence on mental health. The inclusion criteria for the review used were articles in the English language and relevant dates from 2014 to 2021. The key terms used were *adverse childhood experiences and mental health, community mental wellness, family and adolescent and mental health outcomes, childhood with adverse childhood experiences and parent assessment, caregiver-infant interaction, parent-child relationships, and child abuse prevention*. The research articles were evaluated for quality using the John Hopkins Evidence-based Practice tool (JHEBP) and found to be high-quality level I systematic reviews and meta-analysis, random control trials and level II and III high-quality quantitative and qualitative studies.

**Results:** Evidence gathered from the literature review postulates that parent-child programs are beneficial in improving behavioral and learning problems in children. It strengthens parent-child relationships and influences children’s and parents’ overall mental health.

**Conclusion:** Family wellness programs can effectively establish attachment, a vital component for social and emotional development. It also promotes improved learning and a reduction in behavioral problems.

*Keywords:* mental health and family wellness, *childhood mental health, adverse experience*
Promoting parent-child relationships through community-based family wellness programs to improve mental health in children.

Mental health is a chronic issue that affects people of all ages, and ethnic and racial backgrounds. In addition, studies have shown that mental health problems have become ubiquitous among children and approximately one out of seven children under the age of 12 will meet the criteria for a mental health disorder (Sawrikar et al., 2022). The purpose of this manuscript is to address early mental health problems in children and promote family-based wellness education to promote healthy parent-child relationships.

**Background**

Parents are the most critical caretakers in a child’s life and whom they trust and seek comfort and protection. Therefore, parent-child relationships predict the child’s future experience with society and play a fundamental role in their social and emotional growth (Tryphonopoulos et al., 2016). In addition, formidable relationships, such as mothers with post-partum depression, young parental age, and drug-using parents, increase the risk for insecure attachment, psychological and developmental issues, and poor stress coping mechanisms in children (Tryphonopoulos et al., 2016). Subsequently increasing the risk of mental health issues in children and adolescents due to their developing brains. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as trauma, child abuse, and neglect can contribute to mental health problems, including anxiety and depression, usually diagnosed in adolescence and are “the leading determinant of the health and social well-being of the nation, and the major factor underlying addictions.” (Roberts, 2019, p.1). Therefore, children who grow up in families with parents who suffer from mental health or substance abuse problems have an increased risk of developing
several physical and psychological health issues and social difficulties (Skerfving et al., 2014). With this knowledge, we can implement interventions to include early childhood assessments to promote and maintain mental well-being. As mentioned earlier, ACEs are more likely to occur in the child’s household and implementing community wellness programs to assess family dynamics can help promote early interventions, therapy, treatment, and education to parents. Children who are victims of trauma, abuse, and neglect are more likely to have behavioral and conduct problems at school. The purpose is to identify children at risk for ACEs during their developmental years and initiate early interventions to prevent worsening mental health problems including depression. Thus, addressing the “significant gap between the need for child mental health services and the use of these services by families.” (Sawrikar et al., 2022, p.239).

**Review of Literature**

The articles reviewed for this manuscript were evaluated for level and quality against the John Hopkins Evidence-Based practice model for nursing and health care professional appendix E assessment tool (Dearholt & Dang., 2022) and were found to be level I, II, and IV articles including quantitative, qualitative, quality improvement and meta-analysis studies relevant to my PICOT. The articles were found using a systematic electronic search. The studies found contextualized current research on parenting programs and their positive effect on behavioral and conduct disorders in children. The databases utilized to perform the search included the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PubMed, and Psych Info and included articles in the English language from 2014 to 2021. The search included key terms for *adverse childhood experiences and mental health outcomes, community mental wellness, family and adolescent and mental health outcomes, parenting and children’s mental health, caregiver infant interaction, parent-child relationships, and child abuse.*
prevention. The limitations applied to the search process were articles and journals of the American Academy of child and adolescent psychiatry, and the Journal of Pediatric Nursing. The filters used were English language and subjects aged 5-21, with publication date less than ten years old. Exclusion criteria were articles older than ten years old and not peer reviewed.

Analysis

The benefit of Family wellness programs

From the ten articles found, four studies showed the positive outcomes of parenting programs in reducing a child’s emotional and behavioral problems (Burn et al., 2018; Jespersen et al., 2021; Leitjen et al., 2018; McGilloway et al., 2014). In a pilot study by Burn et al. (2018), 52 out of 72 Australian families from lower socio-economic areas completed the Strengthening Families program to improve family functioning and child parental mental health. The three-hour weekly session within the school included parent education on setting goals, self-care, communication, relationships, setting limits, problem-solving, and family management to prevent drug and alcohol use. The child’s content included goals and dreams, communication skills, identifying and coping with feelings, seeking support, problem-solving, handling change, and psychoeducation on drugs, alcohol, and healthy lifestyle choices. Individual sessions occurred for one hour, and then families would come together for assessment of parent-child interactions (Burn et al., 2018). The study revealed a significant improvement in the child’s emotional and behavioral problems and a decrease in parental psychological distress. However, the study did not address if the child’s behavioral improvement was associated with a decrease in parental psychological distress, information
was retrieved using self-report and lacked a control group that could have been used to compare the study outcomes.

A randomized control trial by Jespersen et al. (2021) evaluated that parent education programs like First Five Year (FFY) proved that compassionate parenting is greatly associated with increased child strengths and prosocial behavior and a slight decrease in conduct problems and hyperactivity. The study was done through a national evaluation of diverse cultures in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma using pre- and post-surveys. The study showed evidence that mindful parenting is associated with increased child strengths, decreased conduct problems, and fewer emotional problems. The study also found that parental stress was associated with children with lower strengths, increased conduct problems, and hyperactivity (Jesperen et al., 2021). Thus, responsive, and mindful parents are vital in decreasing a child’s behavioral and conduct problems and can also decrease parental stress. Subsequently, leading to the importance of parental behavior and how it predicts the development of a child’s behavior. (Jespersen et al., 2021). Although the former study was limited, and parent self-reporting was not reliable; implementing observational reports and schoolteacher reports could be a way to assess improvement in child behavior after six months and reassess parental behavior with more reliable data and outcomes.

In addition to compassionate parenting Leijten et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis study. The Incredible Years parenting program was evaluated to assess the benefits and harms of reducing children’s conduct problems by improving family dynamics. The study revealed a reduction in child conduct problems, reduced parent-reported attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms, decreased parental use of corporal punishment, threats, and shouting, and increased parental use of praise. Evidence of positive outcomes in children was
found, however it did not show any improvement in parental stress levels, depression symptoms, or self-efficacy (Leijten et al., 2018). Even though a small sample was used to gather data, further study is needed to evaluate how family dynamics can impact the overall well-being of both child and parent.

Furthermore, to determine the benefits of positive parenting McGilloway et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study in which evidenced-based parenting training programs showed evidence of significantly reduced child conduct disorders and hyperactive inattentive behavior through positive parenting strategies, including increased proactive discipline. An increase in psychosocial functioning was shown to reduce parents' levels of stress and depression after a 12-month follow-up. The parenting training program also showed positive sibling behavior and parental and family well-being outcomes (McGilloway et al., 2014). Although the study showed positive outcomes in terms of improving behavior in children and overall parental and family well-being, it lacked a control group to show the difference, the program had low attendance rates. Results showed positive benefits of parenting programs, but a longitudinal study could provide more data on the overall benefits of mental health in children and adolescents.

A Reduction in suicide rates

In young children with developing mental health problems, family therapy can help understand stressors derived from family dynamics that can negatively impact mental health. Studies also showed improved mental health in both the parent and child, decreased children’s behavior problems, and reduced the use of physical punishment by parents. In the randomized control trial by Esposito-Smythers et al. (2019), researchers found that Family-
Focused cognitive behavioral treatment (F-CBT) for depressed adolescents in suicidal crisis with co-occurring risk factors showed a decrease in suicide attempts of 20% by six months, after 12 months to 9% and at 18 months to 7%. The study showed the benefits of F-CBT, but better outcomes were from Enhanced Treatment as Usual Study (E-TAU), in which medication was reviewed and adjusted as needed. The study is worth practicing but would benefit from showing the benefits of combining F-CBT and E-TAU to see how it can improve depression in this population. The qualitative pilot study by Burn et al. (2019) showed that family intervention through Family Strengthening Program improved family function, reduced child emotional and behavioral problems, and reduced parental psychological distress. The only limitation was that there was no control group, and the study sample was small but did show efficacy in improving mental health. On the other hand, a meta-analysis research study by Leijten et al. (2018) evaluated the benefits versus harms of The Incredible Years Parenting Program (IYPP) and found a reduction in hostile parenting (shouting, corporal punishment, threatening, and shouting). It also increased child praising and reduced child conduct problems from 44% in the intervention group to 18% and from 37% to 19% in the control group (Leijten et al., 2018). The benefits of the parenting program showed a reduction in conduct problems and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) in children but no effect on parental mental health. Although the study was based on parent-reports and not on observed reports, the study showed the impact on behavior parents have on children and suggest parenting programs to be the first line of treatment for children with ADHD.

Parent-child relationships contribute to the overall mental health of children. A study by Jespersen et al. (2021) and McGilloway et al. (2014) found that parents’ mental health will determine children’s behavior. Both studies were conducted on low-income and socially
disadvantaged families. In a randomized control trial in a diverse population, Jespersen et al. (2021) found that more attentive showed greater child strengths and prosocial behavior and decreased conduct problems, hyperactivity, and reduced stress in parents. The study was from a small sample and parents’ self-report data. It also showed improvements in a child’s behavior.

On the other hand, McGilloway et al. (2014) showed that the Incredible Years Basic Parent Program (IYBP) can improve basic parent competencies, mental health, and costs. The program showed efficacy after 12-moths by improving child behavior, improved parenting skills, sustained parenting stress and depression, positive effects of parent training on sibling behavior and marital conflict, and a decrease in the use of health, social and special educational services (McGilloway et al., 2014). The evidence suggested that parenting programs could be beneficial in promoting mental health in both children and parents.

**Improving overall parental mental health**

Adverse childhood experiences are traumas experienced at an early age resulting in poor Mental health and an increase in high-risk behaviors in adolescents and adulthood. Child maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and physical neglect can negatively a child’s well-being. Negriff et al. (2020) suggest that although multiple factors of child abuse exist, one main determinant is whether the parents were exposed to child maltreatment. Parents exposed to child maltreatment increase the risk of their child becoming victims of child abuse leading to poor mental health outcomes. In addition to poor mental health, adverse childhood experiences can also affect overall physical health, including the increased risk of health problems, lung, and liver disease, cancer, HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), type 2 diabetes, and obesity. The establishment of healthy parent-child relationships are the first step in encouraging mental health in young children. A literature
review by Tryphonopoulos et al. (2016) found that parent-child interaction tools (PCI) are an effective way for clinicians to assess parent-child relationships and are one of the most reliable tools. This review provides education on the various tools used to assess parent-child interactions and a way to detect parenting problems and initiate early interventions. The review assessed caregiver interaction mostly with mothers and not fathers. More data is needed to assess the benefits of both parents being present and how it affects children emotionally and cognitively. Assessing parent-child relationships using parent-child relationship tools can assist clinicians in implementing early interventions and promoting mental wellness in the early stages. According to Brino (2020), a mental illness left untreated has been linked to the number one risk factor for suicide and the second leading cause of adolescent death. Every year 5500 US children and adolescents die from suicide than from those caused by cancer, congenital abnormalities, and chronic heart and lung disease combined. Mental illness continues to rise, especially after the COVID (coronavirus disease) pandemic, where children lost about two years of school, had to isolate, and now with war. The consequence of untreated mental health is irrefragable and should be addressed. Primary care providers play a significant role in the early assessment of mental health in children to promote early interventions, and decrease hospitalizations, and emergency room visits (Brino, 2019).

Clinical Implications for Nursing Practice

The studies found evidence that supports that parents’ overall well-being is imperative to promote better mental health, learning, and coping skills in children. Parents who suffer from illness, including mental health issues, drug addictions, and violence, can negatively impact a child’s mental health and increase the risk of abuse and neglect in a child. Thus, implementing
community wellness programs for families of children with behavior and learning problems can increase the overall mental health of both parent and child through early interventions for both parent and child. Family wellness programs have proved to be effective in reducing childrens’s overall behavioral and conduct problems (Burn et al., 2018; Eshaghzadeh et al.; 2018; Jespersen et al., 2021; Leijten et al., 2021; McGillloway et al., 2014). Behavioral and conduct disorders can be a sign of depression in children. Healthcare providers, school nurses, and Nurse practitioners should promote and educate families on wellness programs and their effect on behavioral health in children and families. Childhood adversities can be both physically and mentally detrimental later in life. Implementing family-based wellness programs can initiate treatment promptly, decrease diagnosis delays, and promote resilience in children. Early interventions can prevent hospitalizations reducing overall healthcare costs.

**Discussion**

Family plays a vital role in the mental well-being of a child. It is important to assess family dynamics to understand the source of a child’s behavior and mental issues. A recent study by Leijten et al. (2018) showed that harsh and inconsistent parenting and lack of affection and involvement in a child’s life negatively affect them and lead to depression which is expressed by conduct problems. Parenting programs can reduce ADHD symptoms and emotional problems. Parenting programs promote increased awareness of positive child relationships, increasing praise and reducing corporal punishment, threats, and shouting. Other interventions include addressing the needs of parents with severe mental illness, home visits, and community interventions that are well-established for parents with increased risk of stress, depression, and substance abuse and targets children of preschool age. These services show positive effects on child development and reduce maltreatment. Nevertheless, parenting alone is
essential in a child’s life, allowing a child to develop self-esteem and help build a secure attachment bond with the child. A secure attachment plays a crucial role in a child’s psychosocial and psychological development. Thus, emphasis on parent-child relationships through family wellness programs are of utter importance in early childhood to prevent depression and promote healthy coping skills later in life.

**Conclusion**

Based on the studies presented there is evidence that implementing family-based programs can help reduce behavioral and learning problems in children linked to depression. This early intervention can be much more financially attainable. It can be a means of early detection and treatment, improve overall mental health in children and detect any parental issues with mental health. Early implementation of parent-child relationships can help understand family dynamics and their role in a child's mental development. This can lead to early assessment and prevention of mental health problems.
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