

**Gains from the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) in Santa Cruz County:
Improved parenting competence, mental health, and child well-being in at-risk families**

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ABSTRACT

Applied Survey Research (ASR) conducted analyses of the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) implemented by First 5 Santa Cruz County in California, USA. The program is a comprehensive, evidence-based parenting and family support system. Parents enroll in the program by self or agency referral (i.e., Head Start, substance abuse programs, etc.) or by court mandate (i.e., Child Welfare Services).

During FY 2009-2012, 628 parents participated in level 4 of the Triple P program with 359 of these completing assessments at program commencement and completion. The sample included predominantly low-income, female (69%) parents of children 0-5 years of age, with either Latino (57%) or Caucasian (34%) ethnicity. Outcome measures included indexes of parent and child mental health, parenting practices, and relationship conflicts. Data from the Child Welfare Department provided records on maltreatment and foster care placement for a subgroup of participants.

Results suggest strong effects of Triple P for all participants. For example, both harsh and lax parenting behavior, as well as child problem severity, declined between the beginning and end of the program. In addition, data from the Child Welfare Department suggest a reduction in substantiated maltreatment allegations and new foster care placements for parents who participated in Triple P compared to a matched control group (Applied Survey Research, 2012). These results support Triple P as an effective early intervention strategy.

Learning Objectives:

1. Demonstrate the effect of Triple P on parenting competence, parent and child mental health, and the quality of parent-child relationships
2. Describe the degree to which family demographics and risk factors are associated with Triple P outcome measures
3. Identify the longer-term impact of the Triple P program on families in the child welfare system

TRIPLE P PROGRAM

Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) is a comprehensive, evidence-based parenting and family support system designed to increase parents' confidence and competence in raising children, improve the quality of parent-child relationships, and make evidence-based parenting information and interventions widely accessible to parents. It is based on a public health model utilizing an ecological approach. This approach initiates activities at individual, family, community and systemic levels to provide a comprehensive structure of support. There are five levels of intervention in Triple P. Level 1 is intended to reach a broad range of community members in the County, and as the levels increase, more intensive services are provided. The focus here is on Level 4 which encompasses in-depth parenting skills and training in a group or individual setting.

Triple P works to improve 17 core parenting skills that fall into four areas: promoting positive relationships, encouraging desirable behavior, teaching new skills and behaviors, and managing misbehavior. It is based on a self-regulatory framework in which the practitioner provides information, skills, training and support based on the parents' concerns. Parents use self-evaluation to set goals and assess progress. While practitioners are helping parents to build confidence and competence, parents are helping children to build these skills in a parallel process.

Beginning in FY 2009-10, three local funders (First 5 Santa Cruz County, Health Services Agency, and Human Services Department) launched a pilot of the Triple P system in partnership with other agencies that serve children and families in Santa Cruz County.

METHODS

Sample

During FY 2009-2012, 628 parents participated in level 4 of the Triple P program. Of these, 359 completed assessments at program commencement and completion. The final sample was predominantly low-income, female (69%), and with either Latino (57%) or Caucasian (34%) ethnicity (see Figure 1.) The sample was divided into two groups based on type of referral to the program. Parents who were court-mandated to participate through their involvement with the Child Welfare system comprised the “Child Welfare” (CW) group. All other parents comprised the “Community” group. According to Triple P practitioners, court-mandated parents may under-report problems at the beginning of services. Therefore, between-group differences were not evaluated.

Measures

Participants completed questionnaires at the beginning and end of the program. These measures included the following:

- **Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI):** Measures the severity of child behavior issues. Parents rate 36 items on whether it is a problem (Yes/No) and the frequency of occurrence (1 (never) -7 (always)).
- **Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS- short form):** Measures three aspects of parent mental health: Depression, anxiety, and stress. Parents rate 21 items from 0 (does not apply) to 3 (applies very much or most of the time).
- **Parent Problem Checklist:** Measures the degree of conflict over parenting in the family. Parents rate 16 items on whether it is a problem (Y/N) and the intensity (1-7) with higher scores indicating greater intensity.
- **Parenting Scale (short form):** Measures the level of three parenting traits: Laxness, Over-reactivity, and Hostility. The scale contains 13 items, rated from 1 to 7 with higher scores indicate more maladaptive parenting skills.

In addition, **maltreatment allegations** and **foster care placement** records were obtained from the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department for court-mandated participants.

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics

Group:	All	Community	Child Welfare
n	359	234	125
Gender (female)	69%	75%	58%
Ethnicity			
Latino/Hispanic	57%	69%	37%
Caucasian	34%	26%	51%
African-American	2%	1%	3%
Asian-American	<1%	<1%	2%
Multiracial	3%	2%	6%
Other	2%	2%	2%
Child age at entry			
Years: Months	6:2	6:1	6:3
(range, SD)	(0:0-18:0, 44)	(0:4-14:3, 39)	(0:0-18:0, 52)
Program duration			
Weeks	12	12	12
(Range, SD)	(3-49, 47)	(3-49; 52)	(4-27, 36)

RESULTS

Repeated measures ANOVAs using pre and post scores for each measurement scale were performed for each group, controlling for duration of time in the program (see Figure 2). Figures 3-12 display the results of these analyses¹.

1. The number and severity of child problems (ECBI) declined significantly between pre and post assessments for both Community and Child Welfare participants (see Figures 2 & 3.)
2. Community participants reported fewer and less intense parental conflicts over parenting at program completion than at program start (see Figures 5 & 6.)
3. All parents reported improved limit-setting with their children, and Community participants reported reacting more appropriately when their child misbehaved (less over-reactivity and hostility) by the end of the program (see Figures 6-8). Latino parents rated themselves slightly higher on the hostility subscale at program start than Caucasian parents ($p < .06$).
4. Declines in parent depression (Community only), anxiety and stress were associated with participation in the Triple P program (see Figures 10-12.) Females tended to report slightly higher levels of stress than males at the beginning of the program ($p < .08$).

¹ For all Figures, ***= $p < .001$, **= $p < .01$, *= $p < .05$, and + = $p < .07$.

5. Child Welfare court-mandated Triple P participation was associated with lasting benefits, including lower rates of new substantiated maltreatment allegations and fewer new foster care placements a year after program entry compared to Child Welfare court-mandated participation in another parenting program (see Figures 12 & 13.)

Figure 2. Repeated Measures ANOVA Models by Group controlling for duration in the program, by group

Group:	Community			Child Welfare		
	df	F	P-value	df	F	P-value
ECBI: Child Problems Subscale	1, 179	55.52	.0001	1,82	4.14	.05
ECBI: Problem Intensity Subscale	1, 192	74.27	.0001	1, 91	4.90	.0001
Parent Problems Subscale	1,152	17.01	.0001	1, 61	6.82	.01
Parent Problem intensity Subscale	1, 133	8.07	.01	1, 42		>.10
Parenting Scale: Laxness Subscale	1, 217	26.04	.0001	1, 102		>.10
Parenting Scale: Over-reactivity Subscale	1, 218	12.09	.001	1, 100		>.10
Parenting Scale: Hostility Subscale	1, 218	4.65	.05	1, 102		>.10
DASS: Depression Subscale	1, 226	4.23	.05	1, 123		>.10
DASS: Anxiety Subscale	1, 126	3.32	.07	1, 123	6.9	.01
DASS: Stress Subscale	1, 225	10.23	.01	1, 123	8.87	.01

Figure 3. Mean number of ECBI child problems at program start and end, by group

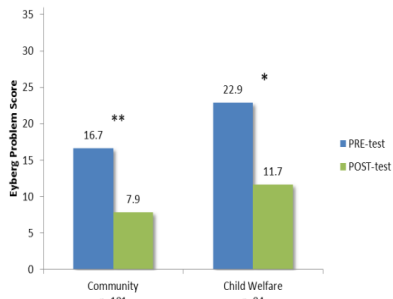


Figure 4. Mean sum of ECBI child problem intensity at program start and end, by group

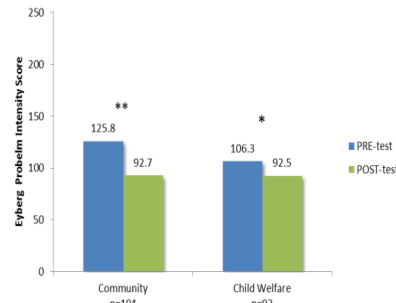


Figure 5. Mean number of parent conflicts at program start and end, by group

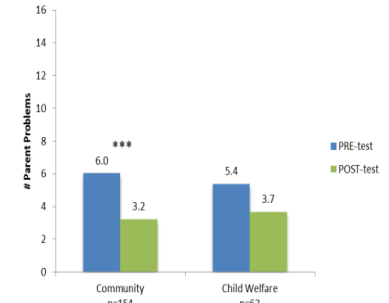


Figure 6. Mean sum of parent conflict intensity at program start and end, by group

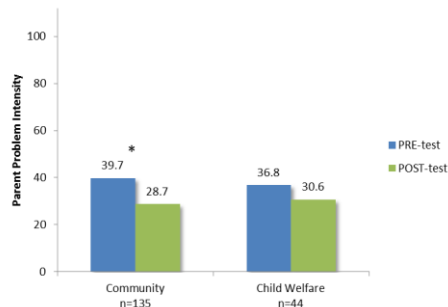


Figure 7. Mean parent laxness subscale scores at program start and end, by group

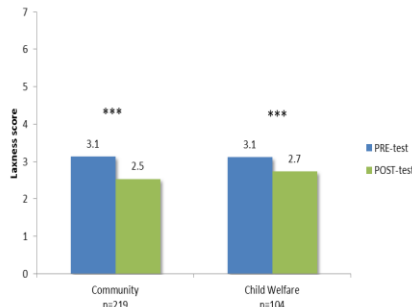


Figure 8. Mean parent over-reactivity subscale scores at program start and end, by group

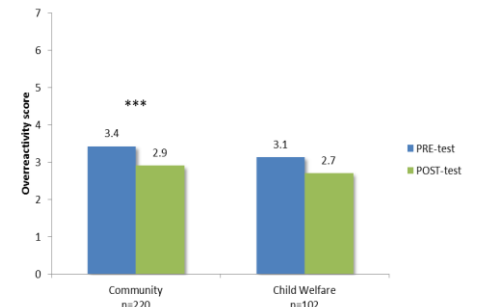


Figure 9. Mean parent hostility subscale scores at program start and end, by group

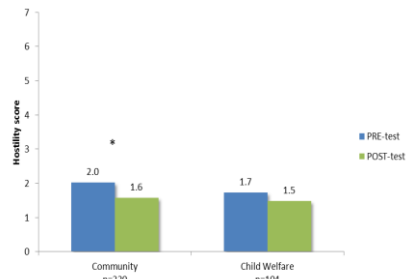


Figure 10. Mean parent depression subscale scores at program start and end, by group

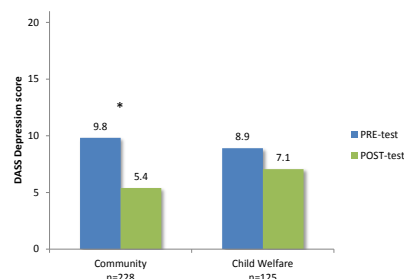


Figure 11. Parent anxiety at program start and end, by group

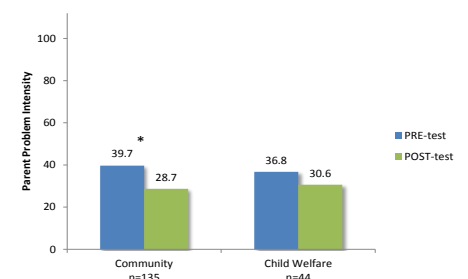


Figure 12. Parent stress at program start and end, by group

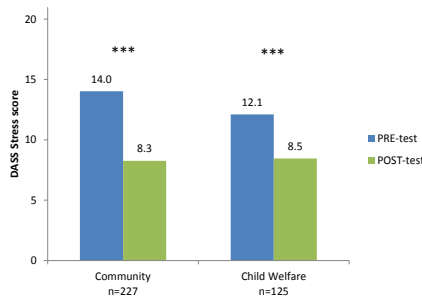


Figure 13. Percentage of Triple P and comparison program participants with a new substantiated abuse allegation

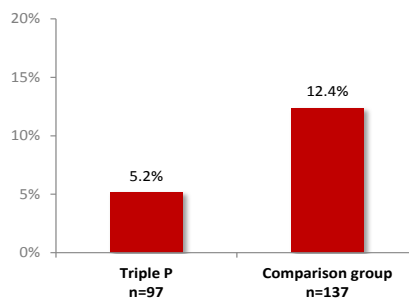
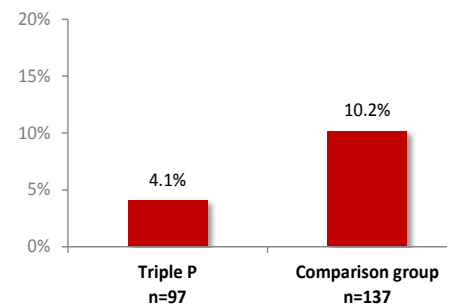


Figure 14. Percentage of Triple P and comparison program participants with new foster care placements



CONCLUSIONS

Triple P improves the well-being of struggling families

- Results of this investigation strongly support the ability of the Triple P program to improve parenting skills, parent mental health, and child well-being for both community and Child Welfare court-mandated parents in Santa Cruz County.
- In particular, parents report fewer child behavior problems, fewer conflicts about parenting, and lower depression, anxiety, and stress at program completion. Parents also report better limit-setting, less hostility, more tempered responses to child misbehavior.

Measures of program impact may be affected by risk status, gender and ethnicity

- As anticipated, parents who were court-mandated by Child Welfare to Triple P tended to report fewer problems at the start than parents in the Community sample. This tendency may have impacted the ability to measure improvement as a result of program participation in the areas of parent conflict, over-reactivity, hostility, and depression for this group.
- Participant gender and ethnicity were not significantly associated with Triple P program impact. Only minor differences were found in pre-scores for the community group: Latino parents had slightly higher scores on the hostility subscale of the Parenting Scale and females reported slightly higher levels of stress on the DASS at the start of the program than males. No other differences were found.

Triple P may reduce repeat incidences of family involvement in the child welfare system

- Triple P demonstrated longer-term efficacy for Child Welfare court-mandated parents by curbing the frequency of subsequent abuse allegations and placement into foster care for up to a year after program completion. The findings suggest that Triple P may be highly effective in reducing later family involvement in the child welfare system. Larger and longer term outcome studies in Santa Cruz County and other regions are important next steps for this research.

REFERENCES

Applied Survey Research. (2012). Triple-P - Santa Cruz County: Special study to assess child welfare outcomes, Summary of findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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