

Should parenting programmes engage with both parents?

The state of the evidence – October 2013

Is there added-value to parenting interventions from engaging with two parents rather than one? And if engagement is with one parent only, does it matter *which* parent is engaged with? Family systems theory would suggest that better outcomes may be achieved by engaging with the most powerful family member (Furrow, 2001). And where studies have investigated the efficacy of engaging with only the father, fathers have been found to be effective ‘change agents’ (Elder et al., 2011) and no less effective than mothers in implementing change (Adesso and Lipson, 1981, Cia et al., 2010). However, few studies have explored this.

Some studies have found that even where only one parent participates in the intervention, gains in family functioning are greater or maintained for longer when there is *another parent in the home* (Bagner and Eyberg, 2003, Hahlweg et al., 2010, Strain et al., 1981). Another-parent-in-the-home also seems to be protective against program drop-out (Bagner, 2013) Confounding variables may include socio-economic status and mental health deficits (Webster-Stratton and Hammond, 1990).

Is delivery more effective when both parents *participate in the intervention*?

Anecdotal evidence has long suggested so. For example, in Turkey mothers enrolled in AÇEV’s internationally recognized *Mother Support Program* asked for a *Father Support Program*, reporting that their husbands were ‘obstacles’ in supporting what women were learning to foster positive child development (Dogruöz and Rogow, 2009); and in the UK, a local evaluation of a Webster-Stratton programme found

some mothers taking the view that the intervention would have been more effective if their partner had attended (Patterson et al., 2005). Among the indicators that predict failure for family interventions “lack of a supportive partner” has been found to be highly significant (Forgatch, 1989; Forehand et al., 1984).

Webster-Stratton (1985) explored the issue of engaging with two parents vs. one more systematically. She randomized but confounded two variables: father-participation in the program and father-presence in the home. Since then, a growing body of evidence suggests the efficacy of engaging with both parents rather than one. May et al. (2013) found better outcomes as have two meta-analyses: Lundahl et al. (2008) and Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. (2003). These both declared interventions delivered to both parents to be ‘significantly more effective’ than interventions delivered to mothers alone. However, numbers were small (for example, there were only 81 fathers across three studies in Bakermans-Kranenburg), and studies such as May et al. did not randomize. It has been suggested that any positive effects of couple-participation may have more to do with the nature of families in which both parents participate, than to joint participation *per se*.

However, three studies *have* randomized (Rienks et al., 2011, Besnard et al., 2009, Cowan et al., 2009) and all have found benefits from couple-participation. For example, Cowan et al. (2009), comparing outcomes between fathers attending alone and couples attending together (with a control), found improvements in both intervention groups, but greater improvements in a number of domains where *couples* had participated. Besnard et al. compared *solo* mother participation with couple participation (and a control) and found mothers’ parenting practices improved when both parents had participated in the intervention. Rienks et al. found improvements both in the parenting alliance and in father-child engagement at home, when fathers had participated in the intervention – whether with their partner or *solo*. By contrast, where *mothers* had attended *solo*, father-child-engagement subsequently *declined* (it remained neutral in the control group). The authors found ‘somewhat concerning’ their finding that what the women had

learned 'may not have been accurately transferred to partners', given that 'mothers are much more likely to participate in relationship education programs'.

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