



# Using implementation evaluation to uncover a child neglect prevention program<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Child neglect is an ecosystemic problem with a great variety of risk factors to consider and, therefore, it requires a multimodal and individualized intervention. Although such an intervention is better for the families, it represents a great challenge for the evaluation process.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study is to document, using Dane and Schneider's model (1998), the differences between the services received by parents participating in a parental group designed to prevent the presence or the recurrence of child neglect.

**Methods:** Quantitative program implementation data was collected from 50 families who took part in a four-module program over a two-year period.

**Results:** The results demonstrate uniformity with regard to the program's central elements despite the differences in the services each family received. Adherence to the program was mainly respected despite slight variations in the number of sessions offered and in the group sizes. On the other hand, dosage varied greatly, with families attending from one to four offered modules. For each module, attendance varied from participation in one group session to participation in all ten group sessions. Moreover, for families who participated in at least two modules, attendance significantly increased between the first and second module. The families' level of participation also differed, with families being rated from low to highly engaged at the end of each group session.

**Conclusions:** Interventions must be adjusted to the specific needs of the clientele and to the characteristics of the environment in which they will be implemented. These variations could have important impacts on the effects of the intervention on the families. Therefore, evaluating these programs requires the consideration of these variations and of their repercussions on the program's effects.

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## 1. Introduction

The evaluation of programs advocating multimodal intervention is a daunting task due to the variety of services offered. A single program may offer the possibility of participating in a great range of services such as individualized and group activities or home visits that tackle various themes. This is the case with a vast

majority of programs aiming to support families where child neglect is an issue.

Two meta-analyses on interventions targeting child neglect concluded that family interventions often lead to minor changes that can be observed through small, or very small, effect sizes (MacMillan et al., 2009; Pinquart & Teubert, 2010). Indeed, the MacMillan et al. (2009) study found that there were no programs capable of preventing the reoccurrence of neglectful behavior. Furthermore, the results shown in the study performed by Barlow, Johnston, Kendrick, Polnay, and Stewart-Brown (2006) demonstrated the difficulty of modifying the trajectory of families when it came to preventing the reoccurrence of child neglect.

This article aims to highlight the possible complexity and variability of an intervention program instated to meet the various

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needs of families living in a context of neglect. What each family was exposed to should be measured before to conduct an impact evaluation. Doing otherwise could lead to great difficulties in detecting statistically significant changes when measuring effects. This article follows the special issue recently published by *Administration Policy in Mental Health* (2011, 38), in which many authors studied the methodology adopted in research surrounding the evaluation of services provided to children under child welfare services (Horwitz & Landsverk, 2011; Landsverk, Brown, Reutz, Palinkas, & Horwitz, 2011; Schoenwald et al., 2011).

### 1.1. Child neglect

Child neglect is a very serious problem that modern society has not yet succeeded in stemming. In fact, current data shows that child neglect is still the most prevailing form of child maltreatment (*Association des Centres jeunesse du Québec*, 2010). According to the most recent U.S. National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4), when applying the Harm Standard, neglect accounts for 61% of all forms of maltreatment, affecting roughly 770 000 children in the U.S. Whereas child abuse has been declining since it reached its peak in 1993s NIS-3, child neglect has stayed at the same level. Moreover, when the more inclusive Endangerment standard is applied, taking into account injured children as well as those considered to be in danger, the data show an important increase in emotional neglect. Indeed, the number of children in that situation has more than doubled (Sedlak et al., 2010).

The consequences of child neglect on children can be severe, ranging from physical and mental health problems to an increased risk of developing patterns of behavior leading to aggression and criminality (Gilbert et al., 2009). For instance, a history of either childhood emotional or physical neglect increases the odd ratio of illicit drug abuse in early adolescence by about 150% (OR of 2.4 and 2.5 for emotional and physical abuse respectively), and the lifetime odd ratio by 30–80% (OR 1.3–1.8) (Dube et al., 2006; see also Dunn et al., 2002; Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2010). Moreover, children living in a neglectful environment appear to show difficulties mostly regarding their social and emotional development. Findings show that, after controlling for the effect of maternal depression and socio-demographic risk factors, psychologically neglectful environments are linked to internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors in children as young as three years old (Dubowitz, Pitts, & Black, 2004; Dunn et al., 2002). Furthermore, children having experienced neglect during early childhood are four times more likely to show delinquency in adulthood than children living in similar socio-demographic conditions but not exposed to this form of maltreatment (Kazemian, Spatz Widom, & Farrington, 2011).

Growing up in a neglectful environment also impacts children's emotional development. Children raised in such a context exhibit a weaker understanding of others' negative emotions as well as a decreased capacity for emotional self-regulation (Shipman, Edwards, Brown, Swisher, & Jennings, 2005). Similarly, neglect strongly influences the intellectual capacities of the child, as demonstrated by results nearly a standard deviation below average in reading, mathematics, and intelligence (Lounds, Borkowski, & Withman, 2006). As a matter of fact, neglect's repercussions on the cognitive, social and emotional development are more severe than those caused by physical abuse (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002).

Over the years, researchers have attempted to understand the phenomenon by which neglect is formed and perpetuated within families. There seems to be a consensus regarding the necessity of adopting an ecosystemic and developmental approach focused on the environmental components that influence the answer to the

developmental needs of the child rather than simply focusing on inadequate parental behavior (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Dubowitz & Bennet, 2007; Tanner & Turney, 2003). According to this point of view, child neglect is defined more as the absence of behaviors that are beneficial to the child than by toxic parental behavior (Éthier, Bourassa, Klapper, & Dionne, 2006). Supporting this affirmation are the findings that neglect is linked to many social factors such as single parenting, unemployment, and the lack of attendance to childcare much more so than any other forms of abuse (Mersky, Berger, Reynolds, & Gromoske, 2009).

According to Trocmé et al. (2005), neglect occurs as a result of a double disruption: (a) a disruption of the parent–child relationship characterized by the parent's significant difficulty in demonstrating an emotional availability for the child, thus jeopardizing his/her physical integrity and development on many levels, whether it be physical, cognitive, emotional, or social; and (b) a disruption of relationships between the family and the community, characterized by a functional and social isolation of members of the family, which leads to the absence of adequate alternatives for answering the child's needs.

### 1.2. Evaluating interventions targeting child neglect

The scope of the problem of neglect and its consequences on children motivates the creation of interventions targeting affected families and, the effectiveness of these interventions is at the center of a growing body of research. Many studies concentrate on maltreatment in general, thus including abusive behavior and neglect. The meta-analyses of Piquart and Teubert (2010) and of Mikton and Butchart (2009) compile the evaluations of more than a hundred studies on the matter. Studies evaluating programs particularly aimed at neglect are rarer despite many authors insisting on the necessity of answering this problem specifically (MacMillan et al., 2009; Mersky et al., 2009).

Amid the studies examining neglect, the one of DePanfillis and Dubowitz (2005) evaluated the effectiveness of home visits paired with collective activities with families identified as being at risk of neglect. Results indicated an attenuation of many risk factors associated with neglect such as parental stress, parental depression, and daily stress, as well as an increase in protective factors (i.e., parental competencies, social support, and family functioning). Overall, this resulted in an improvement of the physical and psychological care and security of the child and in a decrease of external and internal behavioral disorders in children.

A similar study was completed by Barlow et al. (2007). An intensive home visit program was compared to a control program where home visits were less frequent (an average of 41.2 compared to 9.2 home visits over 18 months). The results showed no difference between the two groups for quality of the home environment and with regard to protective issues concerning the children. However, mothers' level of sensibility significantly increased over the intervention period for the more intensive intervention.

The study performed by Éthier, Couture, Lacharité, and Gagnier (2000), which focused on families facing many risk factors but never having benefitted from services of child welfare services, drew the same conclusion. The study compared the effects of two services offered to neglectful families, one psychosocial intervention embedded in regular services to at-risk families and one multimodal program offering individualized and group interventions to parents and their children. Both interventions showed positive results by improving parent–child relationships and decreasing parental stress, depression and potential for abuse and neglect. However, only the multimodal program was associated with an improvement in social support and marital relationships.

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