“I am more than my past”: Parents’ attitudes and perceptions of the Positive Parenting Program in Child Welfare

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A B S T R A C T

Child welfare workers are challenged on a daily basis to achieve the goals of promoting child safety, permanency, and well-being. To achieve these goals, system leaders in two child welfare agencies in a large-Mid-Atlantic City received external funding to implement the Positive Parenting Program (TripleP), an evidence-supported parenting intervention (ESPI). While contextual and organizational barriers have been illuminated among clinicians and child welfare workers and leaders, less is known about the attitudes and perceptions of ESPIs among parents involved in the child welfare system. Thirty-five parents who graduated from or who were near completing Triple-P participated in one of four focus groups. Grounded Theory methods illuminated three core themes. Categories within the first theme “barriers of engagement” included lack of immediate acceptability, multiple demands, limited time and visitation privileges to practice new skills, and biased assessments by caseworkers. However, the parents overcame barriers (theme two) due to Triple-P providers’ ability to cultivate positive therapeutic alliances by praising and recognizing progress, adapting case studies for increasing applicability, and facilitating bonds between peers. Consequently, the parents illuminated the impacts of engagement (theme three), which included: confidence to engage in positive talk with children, increased insight of previous negative parenting practices, and recognition of positive and prosocial child behaviors. Findings underscore the salience of providing support and resources for clinicians and child welfare workers to effectively engage parents in ESPIs. Future research is needed to validate these findings in other agency contexts, and with attention to other ESPIs implemented in child welfare agencies.

1. Introduction

Child welfare caseworkers are challenged on a daily basis to simultaneously balance the goals of promoting (1) safety by responding to child abuse and neglect reports and weighing in on whether to place the child in foster care, (2) permanency in safe and stable homes, and (3) child well-being (Collins-Camargo, McBeath, & Ensign, 2011; Day & Peterson, 2008). Historically, youth and families in the foster care system have received services that (1) typically are not empirically supported by research evidence (Asgary-Eden & Lee, 2011; Barth et al., 2005; Garcia, Circo, DeNard, & Hernandez, 2015; Garcia & DeNard, 2017), and (2) have limited buy-in or acceptability and input among parents and caregivers (Sanders & Kirby, 2012).

One of the primary ways in which child welfare agencies aim to address these limitations, and thereby achieve the three goals, is by implementing evidence-supported parenting interventions (ESPIs) (Administration for Children and Youth and Families (ACF), 2017). Numerous randomized control trials have demonstrated that ESPIs reduce maladaptive parenting behaviors; address children’s behavioral, emotional, and psychosocial problems; and prevent maltreatment (Barth et al., 2005; Briscoe-Smith & Hinshaw, 2006; Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, Rinaldis, Firman, & Baig, 2007; Timmer, Urquiza, Zebell, & McGrath, 2005). With few exceptions (Mersky, Topitzes, & Blair, 2017; Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, & Reid, 2009), however, the effectiveness of ESPIs has not been evaluated among child welfare-involved parents and youth.

1.1. Local implementation context

The current study recruited parents who were referred to child welfare agencies in a large city in the Northeastern United States when agency leaders decided to seek external funding to implement TripleP in 2015. Over the past 30 years, studies have demonstrated that TripleP promotes child safety, permanency, and well-being by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents in the general population.
(Alley et al., 2012; Sanders, Turner, & Markie-Dadds, 2002). However, the ability to evaluate these outcomes within the local context and among a different target population inclusive of child welfare-involved parents is not feasible until TripleP is implemented to fidelity. Implementation science, defined as systematic processes, activities, and resources that are used to integrate interventions into practice settings (Rabin, Brownson, Haire-Joshu, Kreuter, & Weaver, 2008), is an evolving specialty across many disciplines. In particular, there is limited understanding of the empirically supported pathways or strategies that increase the likelihood that ESPIs, such as TripleP, are implemented in child welfare systems (CWS). Aarons, Hurlburt, and Horwitz (2011), drawing from prior research, proposed the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment (EPIS) model. The EPIS model underscores inner and outer contextual factors that may impact the exploration, preparation, implementation, and sustainment processes of ESPIs in child welfare and mental health agencies. As delineated in the EPIS model, outer contextual factors include the socio-political context, effective leadership ties and practices across systems, and intra-organizational networks, while the inner context includes individual adopter characteristics, demographics, adaptability, and attitudes toward ESPIs, as well as organizational capacity and oversight, readiness for change, receptivity, culture, and climate.

Acknowledging that the EPIS model has not been empirically validated, scholars have outlined the inner and outer contextual barriers and facilitators of implementing ESPIs from the perspectives of home-based services case managers (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007) and clinicians in community-based agencies (Asgary-Eden & Lee, 2011) who serve youth at-risk for maltreatment and/or youth who are involved in the child welfare system. Awareness of the perspectives of leaders and supervisors in community-based agencies (Asgary-Eden & Lee, 2011) and in agencies delivering home-based services to reduce neglect (Palinkas & Aarons, 2009) is also increasing. By and large, they report they are not adequately prepared to implement ESPIs, citing lack of adequate leadership or accountability, inadequate training, high turnover, lack of organizational support, and lingering perceptions about the lack of acceptability, or “buy-in,” of the relevance of the ESPIs for the target population they serve.

1.2. Parental perspectives of the ESPI implementation context in child welfare

According to diffusion of innovations theory, three key factors promote the dissemination and implementation of new and innovative programs: (1) perceptions that people, government agencies, and organizations have about the program; (2) characteristics of the people who adopt or fail to adopt the program; and (3) inner and outer contextual factors (Berwick, 2003; Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Sanders & Kirby, 2012). While scholars have revealed the perspectives of clinicians and child welfare caseworkers in regard to the aforementioned key factors (Asgary-Eden & Lee, 2011), much less is known about parents’ attitudes and perceptions of ESPIs that are implemented in the CWS. That is, how parents perceive the inner and outer context as “consumers” or clients of child welfare agencies, and if and how they navigate and overcome inner and outer contextual barriers that prevent engagement in ESPIs to fidelity are unknown. Sanders and Kirby (2012, p. 239) underscored that “translational research efforts to ‘scale up’ empirically supported parenting interventions are likely to be more successful when program developers, researchers, service providers, and funders adopt a strong consumer focus to their work with families.” To date, due to significant gaps in the literature about parental perceptions, knowledge on how best to tailor dissemination and implementation strategies in the CWS is not typically informed by the “consumers” who are expected to engage in them. In a recent and relevant study, Lewis, Feely, Seay, Fedoravics, and Kohl (2016) sought to address this gap by interviewing 47 parents who participated in Pathways TripleP after being investigated for child maltreatment. Based on the interviews, the researchers concluded that most of the parents believed Pathways TripleP to be acceptable (satisfactory) and appropriate (relevant and useful) due to its content, structure, and materials. However, parents were expected to juggle multiple competing demands (e.g., completing court-ordered services, visiting children who were removed from the home, and attending employment assistance programs). These demands, in turn, may have negatively impacted their level of engagement.

While the study conducted by Lewis et al. (2016) is the only study to acknowledge that the EPIS model has not been empirically validated, the current study is the only study to focus on parental perceptions of ESPIs in a child welfare context, their study sample was restricted to females who resided in Missouri, and as the authors pointed out, additional research in the U.S. is warranted. Unlike in their study, fathers made up nearly one third of the sample in the current study, and nearly all of them identified as African American. Moreover, study protocol called for a deeper inquiry into (1) what factors facilitate and prevent access and engagement, and (2) suggestions to modify implementation and engagement strategies.

1.3. Parental perspectives of child welfare services

Although research on parental perceptions of ESPIs is limited, it is worth calling attention to scholars who focus more broadly on engagement in child welfare/casework services. Kemp, Marcenko, Lyons, and Kruzich (2014), for example, concluded that more efforts must be devoted to implementing strength-based practice. Affirmation, honesty, and directness, as well as collaboration, empowerment talk, and reassurance, were cited as factors that cultivate and sustain a positive-helping relationship (Altman, 2008; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vaneski, 2009; Schreiber, Fuller, & Paceley, 2013). After interviewing 40 parents involved with child protective services, Schreiber et al. (2013) added that professional competence of the worker (e.g., conducting thorough and fair assessments), positive communication skills, and emotional support (e.g., providing resources, making referrals, finding commonality, and empowering parents) were also key to engagement. These skills were likely to increase program completion among parents, as reported by Girvin, DePanfilis, and Daining (2007). Girvin and colleagues found, in particular, that completers of the Family Connections Program were more likely to endorse a positive alliance with workers compared to those who did not complete the program. However, the study sample was restricted to those at-risk for neglect and who were not involved with the child welfare system. Regardless, parents who trusted caseworkers and who believed they were knowledgeable about parenting, and in turn, fully comprehended their issues of concern and how to address them, reportedly endorsed the most positive changes (Gladstone et al., 2012). The lingering question is whether parents believe child welfare workers and clinicians adopt strength-based approaches in the process of implementing ESPIs.

1.4. Cultural relevancy of ESPIs in non-child welfare populations

For sake of relevancy, it is imperative to note that nearly 90% of the target population served by the county child welfare system where this study was conducted identify as African American or Latino. Thus, the current study provides a rare opportunity to incorporate the voices of parents who are often neglected in advancing new empirical knowledge not only due to child welfare involvement, but also due to their identity. What is well established thus far is that parents from culturally diverse backgrounds are less likely than Caucasian families in the general population to access parenting programs and mental health services (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1997; Snowden & Yamada, 2005). To address issues of access, a few scholars have explored the perceptions of ESPIs among parents of color. For example, Parra Cardona et al. (2012) studied perceptions of parents who immigrated from Mexico and participated in either the Parent Management Training – the Oregon Model (PMTO) or in the “enhanced” PMTO with
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