Getting Ready: The Effects of Parent Engagement on School Readiness and Social Competence of Low-Income Children

Susan M. Sheridan, Carolyn Pope Edwards, Lisa L. Knoche, Keely D. Cline & James A. Bovard

Introduction

Among the developmental contexts that predict outcomes for young children, those related to the family and child-rearing environment are most critical (Barnett et al., 2004; Lesch & Park, 1999; Mistry et al., 1997).

The earliest environments experienced by children, determined within the context of the family system, are significant in how children conceptualize relationships and, in turn, how they relate with others (Stein, 2001; Glahnkoff & Weis, 1997).

Parental engagement is highly predictive of a child’s developing competence in cognitive, social emotional, and behavioral domains (Crosnoe et al., 2006; McCartney et al., 2000; Thompson, 2002). Parental engagement is characterized by: (1) parental warmth, support, and responsivity to the child’s emerging autonomy; and (2) active and meaningful participation in learning and literacy.

Children interested in and permeate multiple systems and contexts as they develop from infancy to preschool and beyond. Furthermore, changes in systems and caregivers is important for enhancing developmental outcomes.

Positive relationships and collaborative partnerships among parents and educators are considered critical protective factors (Crosnoe & Stein, 2001; Weinberg & Greenberg, 1990) or safe sets (Crosnoe, 2000); for children, and have been shown to be linked to a host of positive developmental outcomes, including social and behavioral competence (Henderson & Beres, 1994; Sheridan, Knokeff, & Ellott, 1999).

The goal of collaborative partnerships is “not to merely feel good about what we are doing, but to follow significant outcomes for strengthening children’s learning and development” (Crosnoe & Stein, 2001). This type of collaboration is particularly important during the infant and preschool years (Kraft and Ehrlich, 1996) when parents are developing construct of their role in their child’s education.

A critical need exists to integrate and evaluate interventions that promote parental engagement through family-centered, collaborative approaches to achieve desired outcomes for young children’s development and school readiness, including social and behavioral competence.

Objectives and Research Aims

Overall Objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a multicomponent, multisystemic intervention that: (1) engages the child and parent, (2) addresses both home and center/school environments, (3) is designed to improve the skills of intervention agents to increase early outcomes, and (4) promotes parent engagement across multiple social and learning contexts.

Aims of Current Study

 Aim 1: To describe the effectiveness of a comprehensive, family-centered intervention on preschool children’s level of social-emotional competence.

 Aim 2: To determine the extent of the intervention on preschool children’s level of behavioral functioning.

Methods

Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Child Demographics (N = 304 at Time 1 Assessment)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified Disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

| Head Start classrooms in Milwaukee public school system |

Outcomes

Outcome Measures

Table 1. Mean Scores on Outcome Measures for Participants’ Children Across 4 Time Points

Social Emotional Competence

| Table 2. Effect Size for Multivariate Analyses of Covariance Models Exploring Social Emotional Competence (SCBE-30) |

Social Competence and Behavioral Evaluation – 30 (LaFreniere & Danos, 1990)

Social-Emotional Competence Outcome

Discussion

Social Competence

Children in the Getting Ready treatment group demonstrated enhanced levels of attachment behavior with other adults, including teachers, compared to the control group. There were no significant changes in teacher-reported measures of self-control or overall social competence.

The intervention focuses on relationships between children and parents, and parents and teachers, and indirectly on teachers and children. Relationships between parents and teachers are developing, and the parent-child relationship is being enhanced; a subsequent change may be occurring in the relationship between teachers and children.

Other research has suggested the strong influence of the teacher-child relationship in early childhood settings (Bird & Latt, 1997) as a mediator of positive student outcomes.

Mature changes over time were seen in initiative demonstrated by children in the treatment group, relative to control children. The intervention aimed at helping teacher-parent support a child’s emerging autonomy, which in turn may promote initiative and self-reliance. Continued exploration of the effects of the intervention on this variable, along with other measures of social competence, is important.

Behavioral Functioning

Children in the Getting Ready treatment group experienced a reduction in teacher-reported measures of anxiety/worried behaviors compared to children in the control group. There were no significant changes in measures of anger/aggression.

Parents with anxious/withdrawal children may be more responsive to the intervention than parents with aggressive/vulnerable children.

Alternatively, the enhanced level of teacher-child attachment may have a stronger or stronger impact on engaging the anxious/withdrawal children than it does on bullying high levels of anger and aggression.

Finally, the intervention may be more effective with certain types of children (e.g., preschoolers with internalizing features) than others (e.g., those with disruptive behaviors).

Limitations

Findings are very preliminary. A complete dataset with measures across 4 time points is available for only a subset of the entire sample.

Only a subset of findings are reported. Data on parent-child interactions, parental role and involvement in education, and changes in the home environment are not reported here.

Children not assessed in teacher report only. Multiple children of child behaviors across home and preschool settings will be helpful to gauge effects of the intervention objectively across contexts.

Findings can only be generalized to children in Head Start center-based settings. Early Head Start sample is not included herein.

Future Research Directions

Examine data with a large group of participants.

Investigate changes across domains in groups of infants/toddlers as well as preschoolers.

Consider the effect of the intervention on other developmental dimensions.

Table 3. Multivariate Analyses of Covariance Models Exploring Social Emotional Competence (SCBE-30)

**α** = 0.05.