

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Promoting Fathers' Engagement with Children: Preventive Interventions for Low-Income Families

Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., & Wong, J. J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventive interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(3), 663-679.
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SUMMARY: Fathers' engagement with children is crucial for children's optimal development. By randomly assigning 289 low-income families into the father-only intervention group, the couples' intervention group, or the control group, the study examined the effectiveness of a parenting education program on family relationships and child outcomes. Results revealed that the interventions were helpful for increasing family well-being.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Compared with the control group, families in the intervention groups showed more fathers' involvement with children, improved couple relationships, and fewer child problem behaviors.
- Participants in the couples' group showed more improvements than participants in the father-only group.
- The intervention effects were similar for families regardless of race/ethnicity, family structures, or family incomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate military fathers about parenting practices that could increase the quality of father-child relationships
- Support military fathers who are facing deployment by offering them strategies that would help them stay connected with their spouses and children

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for military fathers where they can communicate and support each other
- Develop workshops for military fathers to increase their parenting skills and marital satisfaction

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness of the importance of fathers' engagement and father-child relationships for children's development
- Recommend military fathers to increase their involvement with children by spending more time with children, and learning parenting skills

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited through direct referrals from county service agencies, talks at community meetings, ads in local media, and information tables.
- The couples were randomly assigned to three conditions: a 16-week group for fathers (N = 96), a 16-week group for couples (N = 95), and a control condition (N = 98).
- All participants were assessed at baseline, seven months, and 18 months after the start of the study; the retention rate was 78%.
- Assessments included father-child relationships, parenting stress, parenting style, couple relationships, and children's behavioral problems reported by each parent.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 289 couples with low income.
- The number of children from the participating families ranged from 0 (mother was pregnant with the first child) to 7, and the median age of the youngest child was 2.25 years; the average ages of the parents were not indicated.
- The majority of the participants were Latino (67%), followed by White (27%) and other (6%).

LIMITATIONS

- According to the authors, significantly more participants with initially higher distress at baseline dropped out of the study, therefore the results may be subject to selection bias caused by attrition.
- All measures were solely based on parent reports, so the results may be biased by parents' perspectives.
- The majority of the participants were Latino and White, so the race/ethnicity composition of the sample is difference from the composition of the general American population.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Measure father-child relationships by observing them interacting in natural environments
- Increase the diversity of the participants by recruiting from a broader race/ethnicity background
- Examine the long-term effect, beyond 18 months, of the intervention program

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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