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Building Safe Communities
UpStart Parent Survey Project

Final Report – Phase One

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Purpose of Project

The UpStart Parent Survey was developed to help agencies evaluate common outcomes (as determined by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research or ACCFCR) of their prevention-focused parenting programs (P-FPP). *Building Safe Communities*, a short-term project funded by the Centre for Criminology and Justice Research, is beginning to provide critical information about the feasibility of measuring population-based common outcomes of these P-FPP. The purpose of this short-term project is to (1) examine the psychometric properties of the UpStart Parent Survey, and (2) determine the feasibility of using the tool in P-FPP.

Building Safe Communities is aligned with the overarching mandate of the Minister of Justice and Attorney General to build safe communities through a focus on the root causes of crime. There are many programs that support positive parenting with the intent of promoting positive parenting and pro-social behaviour in children, thus reducing the risk of Alberta children getting caught up in crime. However, there is limited strong evidence of the effectiveness of P-FPP that begin in early childhood. This is due, in part, to lack of rigorous, population-based measurement.

Improving the Efficacy of Prevention-Focused Parenting Programs

Several decades of research show a consistent relationship between the quality of parenting and the development of childhood physical aggression (Benzies, Magill-Evans, & Keown, 2009; Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006). Families are the first, and most important, context for socializing children to the norms and rules of society. Increasingly, there are reports of serious threats to efforts to prepare children for the demands of today's society because families are challenged by, among other things, lack of knowledge about early childhood development, increasing external time demands, and socio-economic pressures (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005). The result may be harsh and ineffective parenting, which is significantly related to increased risk of school failure and development of conduct disorders (anti-social, aggressive, and offending behaviour) (Gardner, Burton, & Klimes, 2006; O'Connor, 2002). In a longitudinal sub-sample of children ($N = 975$) drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Benzies and colleagues (2009) determined that harsh and ineffective parenting not only had an immediate effect on children's physical aggression, but also had a sustained effect that carried forward in time up to the age of 6 years. This study is the first to suggest that negative parenting has an effect on childhood aggression in infancy, even before the child begins to exhibit aggressive behaviours. These results suggest that supports for early parenting may be critical to prevent development of aggression and potential delinquency.

While the majority of children ‘grow out’ of aggressive behaviours in early childhood, many do not and continue with an escalating trajectory of physical aggression that frequently result in later criminal behaviours and justice system involvement (Tremblay et al., 2004). Howell’s (2003) examination of the literature on the careers of juvenile offenders found that the onset of serious delinquency is often a continuous process from childhood through the end of the teenage years. The lack of a warm positive relationship with a significant adult appears to increase the risk of social or behavioural problems in children (Johnson, Cohen, Chen, Kasen, & Brook, 2006). Behavioural problems in children are linked to increased costs to government systems, including education, social services, and justice (Scott, Knapp, Henderson, & Maughan, 2001).

Parenting knowledge and skill are key contributors to child development. Parental knowledge of child development shapes overall expectations of and interactions with the children. Parenting self-efficacy is moderated by the caregivers’ knowledge of child development (Reiner Hess, Teti, & Hussey-Gardner, 2004). That is, parents with higher levels of knowledge demonstrate higher parenting efficacy and competence. Conversely, those with low levels of knowledge demonstrate low parenting competence, regardless of their parenting efficacy. In particular, parents with less knowledge of child development often overestimate the rate of development which could potentially lead to inappropriate expectations, impatience and intolerance (Cowan, 2001).

In Alberta, there are many P-FPP that provide information and support to parents of young children with the intent of reducing the risk of children engaging in criminal behaviours. However, there is limited strong evidence of the effectiveness of these programs, which constrains decision makers’ ability to make informed decisions about program investments. The lack of strong evidence is due, in part, to the lack of brief, reliable and valid measurement tools. Typically, tools that are reliable and valid are long and impractical for use in community settings, such as P-FPP. Brief, parent-friendly measures reduce respondent burden, and are more likely to be completed, thus increasing the generalizability of study results. Program facilitators prefer brief measures because they do not infringe on important program delivery time. Therefore, there is an urgent need for research to improve the quality of measurement, and subsequently the scientific rigor of evaluation of P-FPP.

Significance

Building Safe Communities is providing critical information to program leaders and policy makers about the measurement of common outcomes across various P-FPP. A reliable and valid evaluation tool that measures common outcomes is an important step in the evaluation of P-FPP and the

quality improvement of these programs. If the UpStart Parent Survey is found to be an effective evaluation tool for measuring outcomes, it could be used on a province-wide basis across ministries and with not-for profit agencies. Policy and program leaders from jurisdictions across Canada are awaiting the results of this study with great interest as they see the UpStart Parent Survey as a practical and useful complement to existing approaches to evaluation.

Mount Royal University, University of Calgary, Alberta Health Services, Alberta Children and Youth Services, Fraser Mustard Chair in Early Childhood Development, and UpStart: Champions for Children and Youth have been key partners in the development of the UpStart Parent Survey and are supportive of this psychometric study. If the UpStart Parent Survey proves psychometrically sound, it will be a key evaluation tool for *Bright from the Start* – an initiative that will integrate universal, early years parenting supports in Calgary. This major proposal is in final stages of consideration for funding by the Rotary Flames Alliance, and if funded, will be rigorously evaluated by ACCFCR. The Early Years Two report calls for improved coordination of early years’ services, and this initiative will be a model for provincial and national consideration. Demonstration of effectiveness of this approach will hinge on having a tool that can effectively and reliably evaluate this type of program.

Methods

The agencies who have participated in the Building Safer Communities study are critical to this study’s success. Alberta Health Services (Baby and You, and Terrific Toddlers), Parents and Children Together (PACT), Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS), Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (CIWA), Families Matter, Attachment Parenting Canada and Closer to Home have all shown outstanding commitment to the development of this survey from the very beginning. This current study would not be possible without their support.

All participants in the eight P-FPP listed above were invited to complete the UpStart Parent Survey upon completion of their programs ($N = 500$). We proposed inviting an additional subset of 100 study participants to complete the survey again 2 weeks later to determine the temporal stability (test-retest reliability) of the tool, and another subset of 200 participants to complete ‘gold standard’ scales recommended by ACCFCR to evaluate convergent and discriminant validity of the UpStart Parent Survey.

Given that funding and ethics clearance for the project became available in late June 2010 when most parenting programs were recessed for summer vacation, we were unable to completely achieve the targeted sample; however, progress has been substantial. We have distributed and collected 168 UpStart

Parent Surveys for which data entry, cleaning, and preliminary data analysis have been completed. Survey packages to complete the test-retest reliability part of the study were distributed to the parenting program leaders on September 10, 2010. To date, 20 have been returned. Survey packages to complete the convergent and discriminant validity using the ‘gold standard’ instruments were distributed to program leaders on September 20, 2010. United Way funding provided participant incentives (\$20 per parent) to complete the large number of surveys in the ‘gold standard’ packages as completing these packages takes about 40 minutes. To date, 38 have been returned. After the 2-week program recess for Christmas, we expect that the balance of the survey packages will be returned for data entry and analysis. We are confident that we will have sufficient numbers of surveys to complete all aspects of the proposed Phase One research activities.

The measurement properties of the UpStart Parent Survey common outcomes items have been evaluated using traditional psychometric evaluation approaches. Data were entered into SPSS version 17.0 and cleaned. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Data from the battery of scales will be used to assess convergent and discriminant validity with the UpStart Parent Survey.

We are making efficient use of the data we are collecting for the present study. In addition to the measurement evaluation, the data will be used for individual program evaluation purposes. The United Way of Calgary and Area through UpStart, Champions for Children and Youth provided additional partnership funding to write a final aggregate report and individual P-FPP reports for the study. These reports are separate from, and complement, the report that will be written for the Safe Communities measurement study. The deadline for these reports is March 31, 2011.

Findings

One purpose of this measurement study was to test the internal consistency reliability of the UpStart Parent Survey. The survey (attached separately to this report) is divided into 3 subscales. For the Parent Knowledge and Skills subscale of the survey, Cronbach’s alpha was .872. For the eleven items that captured common outcomes of parenting programs (Your Experiences as a Parent), Cronbach’s alpha was .916. For the items that captured parental satisfaction with the programs (Your Experience in This Program), Cronbach’s alpha was .894. For a mature scale, internal consistency reliability greater than .80 is considered satisfactory. The alphas calculated for each of the subscales on the UpStart Parent Survey suggest that the items on the subscale “hang together” and measure a similar construct. Initial Cronbach’s alphas of this magnitude suggest that the UpStart Parent Survey shows very strong promise. In addition,

the Cronbach's alphas suggest that items can be summed to create a total score, which will be valuable for evaluation and research purposes with small samples.

To determine whether we would find any actual differences between pre-test and post-test scores using the retrospective pre-test survey design, we used paired *t*-tests. With regard to parent knowledge and skills total score, there was a statistically significant difference between pre-test ($M = 51.29$, $SD = 9.66$) and post-test ($M = 60.54$; $SD = 8.06$), $t(165) = 13.28$, $p = .000$ (two-tailed). With regard to parental experiences total score, there was a statistically significant difference between pre-test ($M = 54.29$, $SD = 13.60$) and post-test ($M = 65.41$; $SD = 10.05$), $t(164) = 12.57$, $p = .000$ (two-tailed).

One aspect of the feasibility of using the UpStart Parent Survey was parental perception of ease of completion. This was captured by a single item on the survey. Based on participant responses in the 168 surveys completed, the majority of participants (96.9%) found the survey easy or average to complete.

Table 1. Participant Satisfaction with the Survey as reported on the survey ($N = 168$)

Participant Satisfaction	Frequency	Percent
Easy	73	43.5
Average	82	48.8
Hard	5	3.0

Two additional aspects of feasibility, the structure of the survey instrument and the vocabulary used, were captured through program facilitator interviews conducted October 22, 2010. The program facilitators liked the mixture of open- and closed-ended questions, which they saw as beneficial to their work in diverse populations. One facilitator expressed that the open-ended questions were useful because they corresponded very specifically to the specific program outcomes:

I absolutely would not want to see the open ended questions leave. That was the closest I got... they gave me really good information.

Another facilitator indicated that the closed questions with rating scales were helpful for those who may have had low levels of literacy or English as a second language.

The facilitators indicated that some participants experienced a challenge with the retrospective design of the survey. With the understanding of the importance of reflection to evaluate what was learned and understood, one facilitator reported that participants in her programs were frequently confused as to the order of 'before and after'. Facilitators also found that some participants, particularly those with comprehension challenges, perhaps did not answer accurately due to a lack of understanding and ability to reflect on what they knew before. Although one facilitator found it very useful to use the script to support the participants who may have found particular sections challenging:

I think it really helped to show it to them, explain the before and after part, explaining the questions that looked a little different, filling out comments and demographics- all of those things helped them know what was coming.

The level of vocabulary used in the survey appeared to cause difficulties for some participants. Facilitators expressed their concern regarding the use of some words in the survey as participants have varying levels of education, cognitive ability, and fluency in English. In some cases, it was difficult for facilitators to describe the questions with synonyms without changing the meaning or influencing the participant's answer. These problems with face validity will be addressed in subsequent versions of the UpStart Parent Survey.

Conclusion

The importance of having a valid, reliable and feasible evaluation tool is crucial in developing, supporting and maintaining parenting programs in Calgary. With reliable and valid evaluation tools, programs will be better equipped to engage in program quality improvement to more effectively support children, parents, and families and create more cohesive and safer communities.

The initial testing of the UpStart Parent Survey shows promising results. Parents and facilitators find the survey relatively easy to use and facilitators and agencies are getting information that is useful to their program planning. Phase 2 of this testing will continue to strengthen the data base upon which feasibility, reliability and validity testing will continue.

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