

**Parents in Groups: Behavior Skills Versus Problem Solving**

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## Parents in Groups: Behavioral Skills versus Problem Solving

### Statement of the research problem

The parental role, unlike most others (e.g. work, marital) provides little or no opportunity for training, for gradually assuming the obligations, or for becoming an ex-parent (Rossi, 1968). Regardless of the developmental phase of a child's life, the parental role can be stressful. Particularly stressful is the parenting of an aggressive and/or non compliant child.

### Research background questions/hypotheses

Research findings (e.g. Forehand & McMahon, 1981; Patterson, 1982) suggest that changes in parental behaviors and attitudes produce changes in parent's interactions with their aggressive children. The goal of behavioral parent training has been to modify children's behaviors by teaching parents skills in which they may be deficient, such as reinforcement of prosocial behavior and the provision of discipline for antisocial behavior. A number of studies have indicated that the behavioral skill training approach produces at least short term changes in child and parental behavior (e.g. Daly, Holland, Forrest, & Felbaum, 1985; Sayger, Home, Walker, & Passmore, 1988). However, few studies have examined the relative effectiveness of components of behavioral parent training packages (e.g. Horn, Jalongo, Popovich, & Peradotto, 1987; Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, & Hollinsworth, 1988)

The main component of most behavioral parent training packages involves teaching parents social skills applicable in parent-child interactions. A secondary component of behavioral parent training has been to focus on general principles involved in the implementation of social skills. This second component can be conceptualized as problem solving. However the assumption that these two components are necessary in behavioral parent training has not been tested. This leads to the question of whether a primary focus on systematic problem solving might be more effective or more stable than social skills training for parents of children exhibiting aggressive and/or noncompliant behavior.

A second reason for focusing parent training on problem solving skills is that aggression and prosocial behavior may represent opposite kinds of interpersonal problem-solving strategies (Eron & Huesmann, 1984; Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976). Patterson, Dishion, and Bank (1984) reported that parents of antisocial boys are often relatively unskilled in problem solving. This suggests that to help parents manage the aggressive behavior of their children, parents may need to learn systematic problem solving.

Support for this assumption is also found in a series of studies by Spivack and his colleagues (Spivack, et al., 1976; Shure & Spivack, 1978). The results of their investigations indicated that mother's problem solving skills in roleplayed child situations were linked to her ability to solve adult problems. Furthermore, those mothers with high childrearing scores on the Hahnemann Preschool Behavior Rating Scale (Shure & Spivack, 1978) had better problem solving skills. Thus, an intervention to help parents deal with their children's behavior can be effective when the target is parental problem solving skills.

This study sought to determine which of two forms of group parent training was most effective for parents of children having problems with aggressive or noncompliant behavior. One component focused primarily on behavioral skill training of parents. The second component focused on teaching parents a general problem-solving strategy. While both components enjoy some support in the empirical literature they have not been compared. In

this study the two approaches were evaluated in terms of parenting skill acquisition, problem-solving skill gains, changes in parent's perceptions of child behavior problems, and consumer satisfaction.

### Methodology

The design of this study followed Campbell and Stanley's (1966) pre-test and post-test control group experimental design with the addition of follow-up testing (three months after the post-test). The 56 parents, recruited from the community, were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: an 8 week group training in behavioral skills, an 8 week group training in problem solving, or a waiting list control group.

Subjects had to meet four eligibility criteria. First, the target child had to be between the age of 5 and 11. Having children across a narrow age range, theoretically should have worked to increase the homogeneity of the sample--advantageous both statistically and in group work practice. A second criteria, one that lead to the non-selection of an applicant, was the parent or child having a developmental disability. Some authors (e.g. Baker, 1989) suggest that issues of assessment and skill training are different for families which have a child with a developmental disability as opposed to families that do not have a child with a developmental disability. The third eligibility criteria was that only one parent from the dyad could participate in the study, as it controlled the dosage of the intervention to any one family. In this study, like most parent training studies, 95% of the subjects were mothers. The parent training literature indicates that there may be little benefit in including fathers in parent training programs (Baker, 1989; Firestone, Kelly, & Fike, 1980; Martin, 1977). The final eligibility criteria was that applicants had to agree to the random assignment to conditions.

The independent variable was the type of training: behavioral skill training, problem solving training, and no training at all. Training groups in each experimental condition met once a week for 8 weeks, 2 hours per session. The structure of the groups for the two training conditions were almost identical. For example, the group sessions utilized pre-established agendas, taught skills through the use of modeling and rehearsal, encouraged broad participation and the development of cohesion, and assigned extra-group tasks (For more details see Rose, 1989). Unique to each condition was the focus: in the one treatment condition on improving behavioral parenting skills and in the other on systematic problem solving skills. The group leaders were crossed with the experimental conditions which allowed the exploration of the hypothesis that leader effects contributed to outcomes for subjects.

Dependent measures collected data on parent's perceptions of their child's behavior (the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist), parent's self-reports of their problem solving abilities (the Social Problem Solving Inventory) and parent's skills in dealing with problematic child behaviors (a role play test of parenting skills). Individualized measures of change, using goal attainment scaling, were collected at every group session as well as at post-test and follow-up. Finally, several measures of group process and consumer satisfaction were collected to explore their impact on outcomes.

To test the hypotheses for this study a decision was made to follow the accepted practice of using the individual as the unit of analysis. The design of this experiment, in particular the type of data being collected, the amount of data being collected, and the method used to collect the data pointed to the use of the repeated measures MANOVA model

as the test statistic.

### Results

The four hypotheses of primary interest were tested with a type I error rate, across hypotheses, set at .05. When a statistically significant repeated measures MANOVA occurred, planned comparisons were utilized to pinpoint the difference. Since the MANOVA tests for differences between the independent variables using the means and standard deviations from the dependent variables, table 1 reports this data by experimental condition.

Four hypotheses were tested in this study. One led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the two experimental conditions and the control condition in parent's perceptions of child behavior. Specifically, trained parents regarded their children's behavior as less deviant when compared to control parents. Treatment integrity data suggested that the variables which effected outcome were not a result of departures from the planned training program. Data on goal progress, using goal attainment scaling, demonstrated that most trained subjects made progress toward their goals. In addition, several subjects from both training conditions achieved clinically significant changes. Group process measures showed that parents in the problem solving groups completed significantly less homework and had significantly worse attendance when compared to parents in the behavioral skills groups.

### Utility for Practice

This study provides support for the use of either problem solving or behavioral skills group training with parents experiencing problems with their children. However, the improved parental perception of child behavior problems over time suggests that subjects may come to social workers when they are at a crisis point and that to some extent, time alone resolves the problem. The counter-intuitive finding regarding attendance and participation in the problem solving groups may mean that problem solving is an easy skill to teach and learn. Some of the failure to find other differences between the two experimental conditions may be due to the overlapping theoretical orientation of the two training programs. A number of other methodological revisions are suggested for future studies. Finally, this study also offers two new tools for practitioners to use in assessment and in the evaluation of outcome: a menu of individualized parent training goals for goal attainment scaling and a role play test to assess parenting skills.

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Table 1

Mean Scores for Dependent Variables  
by Experimental Condition

Dependent Measure		Experimental Condition								
		Skills Training			Problem Solving			Control		
		Pre	Post	FU	Pre	Post	FU	Pre	Post	FU
RBPC Conduct Disorder	Mean	22.8	15.1	12.3	21.9	16.7	13.6	19.2	15.6	14.9
	SD	11	8.8	8.8	9.7	8.8	8.7	7.8	6.9	8.2
RBPC Socialized Aggression	Mean	2.9	2.2	1.5	2.1	1.5	0.9	2	1.3	1.1
	SD	2.7	2.6	1.8	2.5	1.9	1.6	2.8	2.5	1.3
SPSI	Mean	167	177	185	174	201	195	166	170	171
	SD	36	46	48	26	20	23	36	31	31
Role Play Test	Mean	3.6	2.6	2.5	3.6	2.3	1.7	4.3	1.4	1.7
	SD	3.3	1.9	2.4	3.3	1.6	0.9	3.4	0.8	1.3