



PARENTS ANONYMOUS® EVIDENCE SUPPORTS THE *STRENGTHENING FAMILIES* APPROACH

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Research establishes that child abuse and neglect is a contributing factor to many chronic diseases and psychological problems (CDC, 2008). Since 1969, Parents Anonymous® Inc. has implemented a strengths-based model of child abuse and neglect prevention serving millions of parents/caregivers and children of all ages in diverse communities worldwide impacting this public health issue. The courageous founders, a tenacious mother, Jolly K., and a social worker, Leonard Lieber, developed this unique mutual support and shared leadership model framed around the belief that all parents/caregivers, children and youth have strengths that can be fostered and through a positive and caring environment. The outcomes of the Parents Anonymous® Program include improvements in individual behaviors, family dynamics, community well-being and responsive public policy which reflect across the social ecological prevention framework (Garbarino, 1977).

Typically, efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect reflect a “blaming and shaming” approach, focusing on the reduction of identified risk factors related to the incidence of maltreatment (Mikton & Butchart, 2009); however, many child welfare advocates acknowledge the importance of enhancing protective factors by promoting positive developmental outcomes using a primary prevention approach (Fraser & Richman, 1999; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2007). Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships have been established as essential to childhood development and a central edict to the public health approach to preventing child maltreatment (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008). Furthermore, protective factors act as buffers by helping families defend against negative influences from their surroundings. Recently, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) developed the *Strengthening Families* approach to unite research and practice around protective factors to prevent child abuse and neglect (CSSP, 2010a). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the research on the effectiveness of the Parents Anonymous® Program to prevent child abuse and neglect provides valuable evidence for the *Strengthening Families* approach.

THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES APPROACH

The *Strengthening Families* approach is focused primarily on the promotion of five protective factors to prevent child abuse and neglect. These protective factors include (CSSP, 2010a):

- *Parental Resilience* (parents’ ability to effectively cope with the various challenges of parenting and every-day life)
- *Social Connections* (emotional and concrete assistance from friends, family, neighbors, and other community members)
- *Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development* (accurate information about how to raise children and appropriate expectations of child behavior)
- *Concrete Support in Times of Need* (financial security as well as access to formal financial support, such as TANF, and informal support from social networks)
- *Children’s Social and Emotional Development* (children’s ability to effectively interact with other people and appropriately communicate their emotions).

Strategies for building these protective factors vary from program to program. Currently, the approach has not been associated with any specific strategy or strategies for its implementation. The Center for the Study of Social Policy believes that its *Strengthening Families* approach can be built into programs and systems in every state (CSSP, 2010a). Thirty-two states have interagency leadership teams in the *Strengthening Families* National Network. The approach impacted an estimated 2,874,000 children between ages 0 to 5 in child care during 2005 alone (CSSP, 2010b).

THE PARENTS ANONYMOUS® PROGRAM

Parents Anonymous® is a family strengthening program that effectively prevents child abuse and neglect using the *Strengthening Families* approach. Parents Anonymous® Inc. operates an international network of community-based accredited programs that adhere to national benchmarks and standards of practice. Parents and caregivers attend the Adult Group while their children and youth (ages 0 to 18) attend the specialized Children and Youth Groups (separated into age appropriate groups).

The weekly groups are free of charge in a setting where participants provide emotional support, build a sense of community, and empower each other to address their problems and seek solutions. Parents Anonymous® mutual support groups for adults are co-led by a trained group facilitator and parent group leader (a group participant selected by other group members). The groups allow parents and caregivers to foster and maintain mutual support and shared leadership® by creating an environment of personal growth and leadership development for all participants. Meetings are made available in partnership with community-based entities such as faith-based organizations, social service agencies, schools, prisons, and homeless shelters.

When parents come together in a Parents Anonymous® group, a powerful mechanism for attitude and behavior change is created through “the helper-therapy principle” whereby reaching out to support others, parents in turn help themselves (Reissman & Carroll, 1995). Through group participation, parents, children and youth build self-confidence in their ability to address any issues and make long term changes in their families. Research confirms that this powerful reciprocity creates a “safe and supportive” setting for all participants to deal with the underlying psychological issues and social factors impacting their feelings and behaviors as adults and parents (Maton, 1988). Through shared leadership® parents/caregivers support one another and partner with the group facilitator when addressing their strengths and challenges regarding child and youth development, interpersonal communication, positive discipline, domestic violence, drug and alcohol problems, effective parenting strategies, and social concerns. Mutual support is the psychological process of giving and getting help that fosters a sense of trust, belonging and community; creates opportunities for catharsis, confession, and supportive criticism; encourages role modeling; and teaches by example effective coping strategies (Levine & Perkins, 1987). Research confirms that this powerful reciprocity creates a “safe and supportive” setting for parents, youth and children to deal with the underlying psychological issues and social factors impacting their feelings and behaviors. Four theoretical constructs characterize the principles of the Parents Anonymous® model:

- *Leadership*: Individuals are valued and parents and youth are considered effective and necessary leaders who shape the direction of their families, programs, and communities. Self esteem building leads to empowerment for program participants.

- *Mutual Support*: Parents and children/youth give and get help from one another in the group. Contrary to the typical subordination of participants in service delivery, mutual support is exemplified by the reciprocal roles of Parents Anonymous® group participants (Cohn & Daro, 1987).
- *Shared Leadership*: Staff, parents and youth form meaningful partnerships in developing and implementing the Parents Anonymous® program, including all policy-making and organizational functions. Together, they share responsibility, expertise and leadership to ensure responsiveness, strengthen families and improve services and communities.
- *Personal Growth*: Parents Anonymous® believes that parents/caregivers are committed to creating positive change, improving themselves, and improving the lives of their children. The Program is founded on the premise that parents, children and youth transform their attitudes, learn new behaviors, and build on their strengths to make long-term positive changes in their lives.

PARENTS ANONYMOUS® ADDRESSES PROTECTIVE FACTORS – THE EVIDENCE

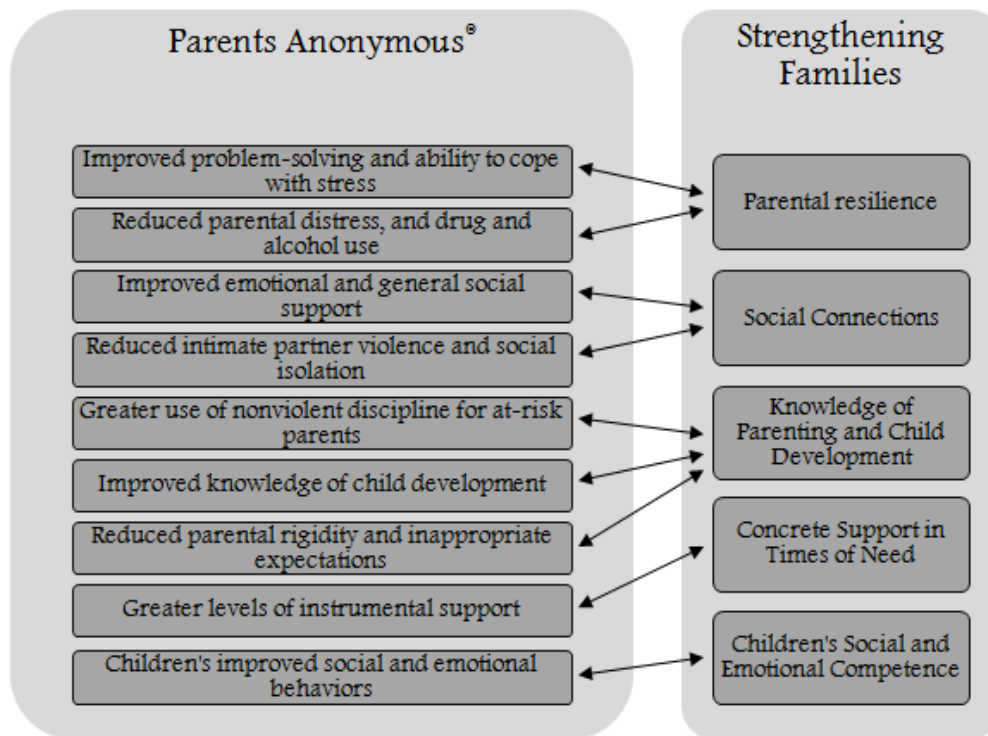
Findings from several evaluation studies show that the Parents Anonymous® program promotes the five protective factors identified in the *Strengthening Families* approach (see Figure 1). The first national study of the Parents Anonymous® programs, a one-time survey of 613 participants, showed that the groups effectively built protective factors and reduced risk factors among participants (Behavior Associates, 1976). Soon after, another evaluation verified these findings (Lieber & Baker, 1977). A study examining case manager assessments of change in parental behavior and attitudes found that parents who participated in the Parents Anonymous® groups were more likely to resolve their issues than parents who did not participate (Cohn, 1979).

A three-year national evaluation of Parents Anonymous®, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice assessed the relationships among group participation, risk factors, protective factors, and child maltreatment outcomes. For the quantitative portion of the study, 206 parents new to Parents Anonymous® groups completed three interviews over a 6-month period. For the qualitative portion of the study, 36 Spanish-speaking parents completed semi-structured, in-person interviews and participated in group observations and focus groups. The evaluation found that

parents showed improvements on child maltreatment indicators, risk factors and protective factors after 6 months of participation in Parents Anonymous® groups, and that parents most in need showed statistically

significant improvements on all measures (NCCD, 2007, 2008).

Figure 1. Aligning Parents Anonymous® Program Outcomes and the Strengthening Families Protective Factors



Parental Resilience

Parental resilience is one of the protective factors within the *Strengthening Families* approach as well as an outcome of the Parents Anonymous® program.

- Parents demonstrated improvements in their problem-solving skills and ability to cope with stress after participating in the Parents Anonymous® program (Alexander, 1980; Borman & Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O’Toole, & O’Toole, 1985; Savells & Bash, 1979).
- Sharing their stories in the support groups helped alleviate parents’ suffering due to stress, depression, and low self-esteem. Participating in the group seemed to validate their lives as worthy and important enough to share; thus, they felt able to change from being

overwhelmed by their problems, to being able to address them (NCCD, 2007).

- For parents at highest risk of drug use when they first started the program, drug use significantly declined after participation in Parents Anonymous®, suggesting that parents are learning more effective methods of coping with stress in their lives (NCCD, 2007).
- Parents reporting intimate partner emotional violence when they first started the program, reported significantly less emotional violence after six months of participation in Parents Anonymous® (NCCD, 2007).

Social Connections

The Parents Anonymous® Program also enhances the social connections protective factor identified by the *Strengthening Families* approach.

- Parents reported lower levels of social isolation after participating in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program (Alexander, 1980; Borman & Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O'Toole, & O'Toole, 1985; Savells & Bash, 1979).
- The quality of parents' relationships with their partners improved as a result of their involvement in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program. Parents credited participation in the support groups with teaching them new communication skills, and more about the opposite sex. The groups encouraged parents to support each other and work as a team regarding their parenting decisions (NCCD, 2007).
- Among those who started the program with the lowest levels of emotional support, there was significant improvement in emotional support after participating in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program, in both the short and long term (NCCD, 2007).
- Among those who started the program with the lowest levels of general social support, there was significant improvement in general social support after participating in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program, in both the short and long term. The same change was seen among other participating parents, but to a lesser degree (NCCD, 2007).

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Increased knowledge of parenting and child development is an outcome of the Parents Anonymous[®] program as well as a protective factor identified by the *Strengthening Families* approach.

- Parents demonstrated improvements in their knowledge of child development and lower levels of inappropriate expectations of themselves and their children after participating in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program (Alexander, 1980; Borman & Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O'Toole, & O'Toole, 1985; Savells & Bash, 1979).
- At the meetings, parents said they learned about child development and how their own behavior affects their children. Learning about child development appeared to help these parents prepare for changes in their children's behavior and handle difficult behaviors (NCCD, 2007).
- Group members indicated that they learned to be more aware of the effect their actions had on

their children and increased their efforts to strengthen their relationships with their children rather than alienating them (NCCD, 2007).

- Parents credited Parents Anonymous[®] with teaching them new ways to interact with and discipline their children, including techniques which might not have occurred to them without the group (NCCD, 2007).
- For parents with the lowest scores at the start of the program, levels of parenting sense of competence significantly improved after participation in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program, in both the short and long term (NCCD, 2007).

Concrete Support in Times of Need

The fourth parent-centered protective factor within the *Strengthening Families* approach - concrete support in times of need - is also an outcome of the Parents Anonymous[®] Program. Group Facilitators and Parent Group Leaders serve as resources and link families with additional services such as housing, mental health, education, social services, and employment.

- Among those who started the program with the lowest levels of instrumental (i.e., concrete) support, there was significant improvement in the degree of instrumental support received after participating in the Parents Anonymous[®] Program, in both the short and long term (NCCD, 2007).
- Parents indicated that, through Parents Anonymous[®], they learned about their rights, improved their ability to recognize when a law was broken, and learned that there are laws that protect them. After participating in the Program, parents reported becoming more comfortable contacting the previously-feared police for assistance, regardless of immigration status (NCCD, 2007).
- Involvement in Parents Anonymous[®] helped some parents find new jobs, get a driver's license, and get involved in their community (NCCD, 2007).

Children's Social and Emotional Development

An evaluation of the Children and Youth groups suggests that the Parents Anonymous[®] Program effectively creates positive change in children's social and emotional development, the fifth protective factor in the *Strengthening Families* approach.

- A substantial percentage of self-identified abused older children sought help through the Parents Anonymous® Program (Behavior Associates, 1983).
- Parental observations of children’s behavior improved during their children’s participation in the Parents Anonymous® Program. Specifically, parents’ reports of their children’s social and emotional behavior improved in:
 - crying more than other children
 - fear of being alone
 - fear of being hurt
 - having difficulties getting along with other children
 - having difficulties getting along with parents and
 - having trouble concentrating
 - lying
 - seeking attention through negative behavior
 - verbal aggression (Behavior Associates, 1983).
- Children indicated that the Parents Anonymous® Program was useful because it taught them how to interact with parents more appropriately and control their anger and not act out. They also reported that the program helped them learn that they are not alone with their problems (Behavior Associates, 1983).

and neglect. Parents Anonymous® is an effective child abuse prevention strategy that contributes to the achievement of the goals identified by the *Strengthening Families* approach. Implications of the research also suggest that by aligning specific strategies, such as the Parents Anonymous® model, within this larger framework, child welfare advocates can unite efforts for a greater impact in the prevention of child abuse and neglect across all levels of the social ecological framework – individual, family/relationship, community, and national/societal – to strengthen family interactions and social responsiveness to parenting needs.

CONCLUSION

Parents can be effective change agents in their own families and serve as prevention champions when given opportunities to work in meaningful ways with others in the larger community to prevent child abuse and neglect. For example, determined to break the cycle of child abuse, Jolly K., a courageous mother seeking help for her family, partnered with Leonard Lieber, her social worker, to launch Parents Anonymous® weekly support groups and complementary children and youth programs worldwide. These humble beginnings provided a platform for parents and staff to work together in the design and delivery of prevention strategies that build on the strengths of parents, families, communities, and society in general.

Research confirms that for over four decades the Parents Anonymous® Program has not only reduced risk factors but promoted all five protective factors of the *Strengthening Families* approach to prevent child abuse



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