ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

The Role of Parents in Children's School Transition

Philip A. Cowan, PhD, Carolyn Pape Cowan, PhD

University of California, Berkeley, USA

March 2009

Introduction

The prevailing explanatory model of children's successful transition from preschool to elementary school assumes that major risk and protective factors lie primarily within the child in terms of cognitive and emotional "readiness" to enter kindergarten.[1] Consistent with this assumption, most intervention efforts involve school-based attempts to improve children's cognitive and self-regulation skills. Investigations of the social contexts and relationships that affect children's transition to school have only begun to emerge. Surprisingly, despite the general acknowledgment that parent-child relationships constitute central contexts for children's development,[2] there has been little attention to the roles parents play in children's transition to elementary school, and almost none to planning or evaluating interventions addressed to parents of preschoolers. We attempt to address these gaps.

Subject

In most studies of children's development, "parent" means mother, and parenting is studied in isolation from other family and social contexts in which parent-child relationships develop. We present a multidomain model of children's development that locates mother-child and father-

©2009-2026 ABILIO | SCHOOL READINESS

child relationships within a system of relationships inside and outside the family, paying special attention to the quality of the relationship *between* the parents. We then describe the results of preventive interventions based on our conceptual model in the form of a couples group led by trained mental health professionals.

Problems

Challenges for the young pre-schooler about to enter kindergarten have been well documented.[3,4,5] What makes this an especially important developmental transition period is the consistent evidence for a "trajectory hypothesis" in both middle-class and low-income samples: how children fare academically and socially in early elementary school is a strong predictor of their academic, social, and mental health outcomes throughout high school.[6,7,8] These findings imply that interventions to improve the child's relative standing at school entrance could have long-term payoff.

Research context and research gaps

Research claiming to demonstrate the importance of parent-child relationships in children's school adaptation has a number of important gaps. We lack longitudinal studies that trace family trajectories across the school transition. Information about fathers' potential role in their children's transition is extremely sparse. Only a handful of studies examine other aspects of the family system context (e.g., the couple relationship) that may affect how children fare. Finally, outside of early school-based interventions that focus on children's readiness, we have very little evidence concerning family-based interventions during the pre-school period that could help children meet the new challenges of entering school successfully.

Key research questions

What do we know from current research about parents' role in shaping children's transition to school? What do the findings tell us about interventions that might provide children with a "leg up" as they make the elementary school transition?

Recent research results

Concurrent correlations. It has been well-established in countless studies that parents who are warm, responsive to children's questions and emotions, provide structure, set limits and make demands for competence (authoritative parents, in Baumrind's terms) have children who are

more likely to succeed in the early years of school and get along successfully with peers.[9,10,11] The problem with these studies is that they do not establish antecedent-consequent connections.

Longitudinal studies. Only a few studies, including two of our own, assess families during the preschool period and again after the child has entered elementary school.[8,12,13] The basic finding is of considerable consistency across the transition in terms of mothers', fathers', and children's characteristics; both mothers' and fathers' authoritative parenting style during the preschool period explains significant variance in children's academic achievement and externalizing or internalizing behaviour with peers two and three years later.

The multidomain context of parenting. Our findings support a family systems risk model[14] that explains children's cognitive, social and emotional development using information about five kinds of family risk or protective factors: (1) Each family member's level of adaptation, self-perceptions, mental health and psychological distress; (2) The quality of both mother-child and father-child relationships; (3) The quality of the relationship between the parents, including communication styles, conflict resolution, problem-solving styles and emotion regulation; (4) Patterns of both couple and parent-child relationships transmitted across the generations; and (5) The balance between life stressors and social supports outside the immediate family. Most studies of children's development focus on one or at most two of the five family risk and protective domains. We have shown that each domain, especially the quality of the couple relationship, contributes uniquely to predicting children's academic and social competence, and their internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours in early elementary school.[15] Consistent with prevention science, then, we have identified a set of factors that can be targeted in interventions to lower the probability that children will have difficulties, and increase the probability that they will display both intellectual and social competence in early elementary school.

Family-based parenting interventions. Over the past 35 years we have conducted two randomized clinical trials in which some couples were randomly chosen to participate in couples groups led by trained mental health professionals, while others were not. The male-female co-leaders met with the couples weekly for at least 4 months.

In the Becoming a Family Project,[12] we followed 96 couples with interviews, questionnaires and observations over a period of five years from mid-pregnancy to their first child's completion of kindergarten. Some of the expectant couples, randomly chosen, were offered participation in a couples group that met with their co-leaders for 24 weeks over 6 months. Each group session

included some open time to discuss personal events and concerns in their lives *and* a topic that addressed one of the aspects of family life in our conceptual model. We found that, while there was a decline in satisfaction as a couple in new parents without the intervention, the new parent couples who participated in an ongoing couples group maintained their level of satisfaction over the next five years until their children had finished kindergarten. Five years after the couples groups ended, the quality of both the couple- and parent-child relationships measured when the child was 3-1/2 was significantly correlated with the children's adaptation to kindergarten (child self-reports, teacher ratings and tested achievement).

A second intervention study, the Schoolchildren and their Families Project[16] followed another 100 couples from the year before their first child entered kindergarten until the children were in 11th grade. There were three randomly-assigned conditions – an opportunity to use our staff as consultants once a year (the control group), a couples group that emphasized parent-child relationships during the open-ended part of the evenings (the more traditional approach), or a couples group that focused more on the relationship between the parents during the open-ended parts. When the families were assessed during kindergarten and 1st grade, parents who had been in a group emphasizing parent-child relationships had improved in the aspects of parenting we observed in our project playroom, with no improvement in the control participants. By contrast, parents who had participated in a group in which the leaders focused more on parents' issues as a couple showed decreased conflict as a couple when we observed them, *and their parenting became more effective*.

Both intervention variations affected the children. The children of parents in the parenting-focused groups improved in positive self-image, and were less likely to show shy, withdrawn, depressed behaviour at school. Children of parents in the couple-focused groups were at an advantage in terms of higher scores on individually administered achievement tests, and lower levels of aggressive behaviour at school. The interventions continued to have a significant impact on the families over the next 10 years in terms of both self-reported and observed couple relationship quality and behaviour problems in the students. The impact of the couple-focused groups was always equal to or greater than the impact of the parenting-focused groups.[17]

Conclusions

In sum, we have shown through correlational studies that the quality of the parent-child and couple relationships is related to the children's early school adaptation. Through intervention

©2009-2026 ABILIO | SCHOOL READINESS

studies, we see that changing the tone of couple and parent-child relationships has a long-term causal impact on children's adaptation to school.

Implications

Our emphasis on family relationships as important contexts for children's abilities to cope with the demands of elementary school admittedly poses a challenge for education policy makers and school personnel. We are suggesting reaching out to parents before children enter school and proposing that children will benefit from an enhanced relationship between their parents. It has been our experience during years of consulting to preschool and elementary school staff that very few have training in communicating with parents, and none are trained to provide interventions that might enhance co-parenting or couple relationships.

An obvious alternative would be to hire trained family educators, social workers, nurses or clinical psychologists to do the outreach and lead groups for couples. Of course this would be costly. What is as yet unknown is the balance between benefits and costs. If the cost of dealing with behaviour problem children to the school and society is greater than the cost of these family-based interventions, perhaps it is time to consider such an approach.

References:

1. Rimm-Kaufman S., School transition and school readiness: An outcome of early childhood development. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RdeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2004:1-7. Available at: http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pages/PDF/Rimm-KaufmanANGxp.pdf. Accessed March 4, 2009.
2. Bornstein MH, ed. *Handbook of Parenting*. 2nd ed. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum; 2002.
3. Pianta RC, Cox MJ, National Center for Early Development & Learning (U.S.), eds. *The transition to Kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: P.H. Brookes Pub;1999.
4. Cowan PA, Heming G. How children and parents fare during the transition to school. In: Cowan PA, Cowan CP, Ablow JC, Johnson VK, Measelle JR, eds. *The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School.* Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates; 2005. Monographs in parenting series.
5. Sameroff AJ, Haith MM, eds. *The Five to Seven Year Shift: The Age of Reason and Responsibility*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; 1996. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation series on mental heath and development.
6. Entwisle DR, Alexander KL. Facilitating the transition to first grade: The nature of transition and research on factors affecting it.*The Elementary School Journal* 1998;98(4):351-364.
7. Kellam SG, Simon MB, Ensminger ME. Antecedents in first grade of teenage drug use and psychological well-being: A ten-year community-wide prospective study. In: Ricks DF, Dohrenwend BS, eds. *Origins of psychopathology: Research and public policy*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press; 1983.

8. Cowan PA, Cowan CP, Ablow JC, Johnson VK, Measelle JR, eds. *The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates; 2005. Monographs in parenting series.
9. Baumrind D. New directions in socialization research.*American Psychologist* 1980;35(7):639-652.
10. Steinberg L. We know some things: Parent-adolescent relationships in retrospect and prospect.*Journal of Research on Adolescence* 2001;11(1):1-19.
11. Parke RD, Buriel R. Socialization in the family: Ethnic and ecological perspectives. In: Damon W, ed. *Handbook of Child Psychology*. 5th ed. New York : J. Wiley; 1998: 463-552. Eisenberg N, ed. *Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*; vol 3.
12. Cowan CP, Cowan PA. *When Partners Become Parents : the Big Life Change for Couples*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1999.
13. Barth JM, Parke RD. The impact of the family on children's early school social adjustment. In: Sameroff AJ, Haith MM, eds. *The Five to Seven Year Shift: The Age of Reason and Responsibility*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; 1996: 329-361 The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation series on mental heath and development.
14. Cowan PA, Cowan CP. Interventions as tests of family systems theories: Marital and family relationships in children's development, and psychopathology.*Development and Psychopatholology* 2002;14:731-760.
15. Cowan PA, Cowan CP. *Five-domain models: Putting it all together*. In: Cowan PA, Cowan CP, Ablow JC, Johnson VK, Measelle JR, eds. *The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates; 2005. Monographs in parenting series.
16. Cowan CP, Cowan PA, Heming G. Two variations of a preventive intervention for couples: effects on parents and children during the transition to elementary school. In: Cowan PA, Cowan CP, Ablow JC, Johnson VK, Measelle JR, eds. *The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates; 2005. Monographs in parenting series.
17. Cowan PA, Cowan CP. Group Interventions for parents of preschoolers: 10-year impact on family functioning and teen’s adaptation. Paper presented at: SRA Biennal Meeting; March 23-26, 2006; San Francisco, California.