

Article 25: Poor Parenting and Parenting Support Programs

Poor parenting practices often intersect with a lack of accessible support, creating a challenging cycle for both children and caregivers. When parents lack the necessary skills, resources, or emotional capacity to fulfill their roles due to various stressors, the resulting environment can negatively impact child development and well-being (Barreto et al., 2024; Beasley et al., 2022; Weller et al., 2024). Therefore, **parenting support programs** offer a critical intervention, providing education, practical tools, and emotional guidance to help caregivers build healthier, more nurturing relationships with their children. These programs are designed to break the cycle by strengthening family dynamics and promoting positive developmental outcomes across diverse populations (Carroll, 2021; Poole et al., 2023; Prime et al., 2023).

Causes and Scope of Poor Parenting in the United States

Poor parenting in the United States stems from pervasive socioeconomic stressors and mental health challenges faced by caregivers in recent years. A significant scope of this issue is driven by factors like poverty, economic instability, parental mental illness, and substance abuse, which inhibit parents' ability to provide a nurturing environment. These difficulties are exacerbated by a lack of social support, inflexible workplaces, and the high cost of raising children, contributing to widespread parental stress and burnout. Consequently, a notable percentage of children, particularly those in low-income families, are at risk for developmental delays and long-term negative behavioral and psychological outcomes (Barreto et al., 2024; Beasley et al., 2022; Weller et al., 2024).

For instance, a study examined how parenting behaviors in early adolescence shape children's decision-making skills by the time they reach adulthood. Following that lead, the researchers used data from a large, diverse U.S. sample of 775 children who often had a parent with a substance use disorder. Particularly, they tracked these individuals from ages 10–14 and later evaluated their decision-making skills at age 19. Parenting was measured through the children's reports on monitoring, involvement, firm versus lax control, and psychological control, giving a detailed picture of both supportive and harmful behaviors. When the participants reached 19, standardized tasks were used to evaluate how well they made decisions in complex situations. The clearest finding was that higher psychological control (parents using guilt, anxiety, or emotional pressure to manage behavior) reliably predicted poorer decision-making competence later on. This link held even after accounting for neighborhood disadvantage, other parenting styles, and parental substance use. The researchers concluded that emotionally controlling parenting can undermine children's growth in rational thinking and self-regulation. Thus, their results point to a wider view of poor parenting in the U.S., which includes not only neglect but also the quieter, long-term damage of psychological pressure (Weller et al., 2024).

Another study explored the relationship between parents' stress levels and negative parenting behaviors in vulnerable U.S. households. Thus, the researchers worked with 54 parent–child pairs from different minority backgrounds in low-income U.S. households. Parents first completed questionnaires on their life stress and their parenting-specific stress. They then took part in a 5-minute “Toy-Wait Task” with their child, which was recorded. Lastly, blind raters coded the footage for emotional tone, warmth, involvement, reactivity, judgment, and other parenting behaviors. Results showed a strong correlation between perceived life stress and parenting stress. The findings also revealed that higher life stress—rather than parenting-specific stress—was linked to more negative parental affect and less

structured, involved parenting. The study found no significant links between parenting-specific stress and observed parenting behaviors in this setting. The researchers concluded that broader life stress can erode the quality of parent-child interactions in stressed U.S. families, highlighting how external pressures such as financial strain and daily life burdens can worsen poor parenting beyond parenting-specific difficulties (Barreto et al., 2024).

On that same note, a study assessed the link between financial hardship and parenting in low-income U.S. households, highlighting how financial strain contributes to poor parenting. Thus, the researchers interviewed and surveyed 70 caregivers living in poverty to understand the pressures shaping their daily parenting experiences. The data showed that unstable income, limited access to resources, and overwhelming day-to-day stress regularly disrupted caregivers' ability to provide consistent or emotionally supportive parenting. Particularly, many reported feeling exhausted, inadequate, and unable to balance survival needs with their children's emotional and developmental needs. These stressors often led to less warmth, inconsistent discipline, and difficulty maintaining stable routines. The findings also revealed that parents' challenges were tied to structural barriers—such as limited childcare options, housing instability, and lack of community support—rather than personal failings alone. Overall, the researchers concluded that poverty-driven stressors play a central role in weakening parenting quality in the United States, making it more evident that many poor parenting patterns emerge from deep-rooted economic strain rather than individual shortcomings (Beasley et al., 2022).

Effectiveness and Impact of Parenting Support Programs

Parenting support programs demonstrate significant effectiveness in mitigating the effects of poor parenting by equipping caregivers with essential skills. Evaluations consistently show that participating families experience improved parent-child interactions, reduced behavioral problems in children, and lower rates of child maltreatment. The positive impact extends beyond individual homes, as these interventions break intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect, fostering healthier community environments. By addressing root causes of dysfunction and providing constructive alternatives, these programs are crucial tools for improving long-term developmental outcomes for vulnerable children nationwide (Carroll, 2021; Poole et al., 2023; Prime et al., 2023).

On that note, a study investigated whether parenting interventions that promote sensitivity, responsiveness, and non-harsh discipline help improve early childhood cognitive outcomes. Hence, data was pulled from dozens of randomized controlled trials involving children under 6 years old, drawing on a wide range of published and unpublished studies to assess the impact of positive parenting programs. Furthermore, the researchers analyzed how these interventions influenced children's mental abilities, language development, executive functioning, and early academic skills. The results showed that positive parenting programs produced a moderate, statistically significant improvement in general mental abilities and a smaller but reliable boost in language skills. Overall, the findings suggest that programs supporting warm, responsive, and non-harsh parenting can enhance early cognitive and language development. Thus, the researchers concluded that strengthening parenting practices through several means (such as parenting support programs) can help mitigate early developmental risks, especially for young children who may face disadvantages from the start (Prime et al., 2023).

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Another study looked at the impact of a 7-week Positive Discipline workshop on both parenting style and child outcomes in vulnerable U.S. households. Following that lead, researchers sampled 91 parents from low-income U.S. communities with a predominantly Hispanic population and collected data at two points: the start of the program and three months later. Particularly, they assessed parents' stress levels, their parenting style (such as authoritarian or permissive), and parents' reports of their children's behavior and adaptive skills. Overall, parents showed less authoritarian and permissive parenting, as well as lower levels of stress, after completing the program. Moreover, children demonstrated improved academic competence and fewer externalizing or hyperactive behaviors per their parent reports. These findings support the notion that structured, supportive parenting programs can help families shift toward healthier parenting practices. Thus, the researchers concluded that Positive Discipline workshops may serve as an effective tool for mitigating stress-driven parenting issues and promoting better behavioral and academic outcomes for children (Carroll, 2021).

Lastly, a study examined whether a parent-to-parent support intervention could improve parenting confidence and reduce problem behaviors in children. Hence, researchers collected data from participating families before and after the intervention. Particularly, they measured parents' self-competence (how capable they felt in parenting) and tracked reports of child behavior and parenting stress. Results indicated that the program was highly helpful for parents, and it led to a noticeable boost in parental confidence and self-competence. Many parents reported fewer behavioral problems in their children following the intervention. Most importantly, the study found no significant differences in outcomes across racial or socioeconomic groups, suggesting that the intervention's positive effects applied broadly. The researchers concluded that peer-based parent support offers a promising, effective way to strengthen parenting skills and mitigate child behavior issues in varied U.S. communities. Since these programs rely on parents supporting other parents, their benefits might be especially useful when formal services are limited, making them a valuable tool for promoting healthier family dynamics (Poole et al., 2023).

References

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