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Source: *The School Counselor*, May 1988, Vol. 35, No. 5 (May 1988), pp. 337-342

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23901682>

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Effectiveness of Parents' Anonymous in Reducing Child Abuse

Phyllis Post-Kammer

Child abuse is a pervasive problem in the United States today. It is difficult to know the magnitude of the problem, because many cases are not reported; nevertheless, the numbers are overwhelming. In 1978, approximately 200,000 cases of suspected child abuse and neglect were reported in the United States. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare estimates that the figure exceeds 1 million, whereas researchers estimate a range from 60,000 to 4 million (Alford, Martin, & Martin, 1985). School counselors need to understand the problem and become aware of referral sources to provide services to parents who abuse.

Some common characteristics of abusive parents have been identified. They were often victims of abuse during their own childhoods, which validates the theory that the type of care people received in childhood is the most consistent predictor of future treatment of their own children (Alford et al., 1985; Blatt, 1981). Many abusive parents conceived their child before marriage, married young, have financial stress (Alford et al., 1985), and reacted negatively to pregnancy (Brunnquell, Crichton, & Egeland, 1981). Use of alcohol or other drugs is often a catalyst for an abusive episode (Alford et al., 1985).

Personality characteristics of abusive parents include negative self-concepts

(Brunnquell et al., 1981), depression, dependency, distrust, impulsiveness (Salter, Richardson, Curtis, & Martin, 1985), aggression, suspiciousness, (Brunnquell et al., 1981) low frustration tolerance (Thompson, 1978), and stress (Justice, Calvert, & Justice, 1985; Subramanian, 1985). Common stressors found by Subramanian (1985) were dissatisfaction with the marriage, low socioeconomic status, and isolation. In addition, abusive parents hold high self-expectations and often set unreasonable standards for children, expecting them to perform tasks inconsistent with their level of development (Alford et al., 1985; Gray & Cosgrove, 1985). Thus, their strong desire to be good parents (Alford et al., 1985) conflicts with their belief in harsh physical punishment as the way to prevent spoiling their children (Gray & Cosgrove, 1985).

Child abuse has become a major concern for school counselors, because they are required by law in most states to report suspected child abuse (Tower, 1984). School counselors need to become aware of programs and community agencies designed to reduce abuse for two reasons—first, to effectively refer parents for help and, second, to become a community resource

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in developing services for students and their parents. DeVoss and Newlon (1986) described the unique role of the school counselor in working with children and parents of sexually victimized children.

Comparing the effectiveness of a behavioral and client-centered group in improving the child rearing skills of abusive mothers, Scheurer (1978) found no difference in effectiveness according to the group orientation. Barmann (1983), however, found that viewing a tape using self as a model of nonpunitive child management skills was more effective in eliciting correct parental commands and praise than was peer modeling.

Programs to help abusive parents are proliferating. Miller, Fein, Howe, Gaudio, and Bishop (1985) described a home-based program using paraprofessionals' services for high-risk families. Subramanian (1985) described a program that attempts to reduce parental stress through temporary emergency care providing child care services. Parents' Anonymous (PA) is a national organization that assists abusive parents by using a self-help support group. The purpose of this study was to describe the function of PA to school counselors for their use as a referral source and to determine whether participation in the Parents' Anonymous self-help group affected parents' self-concept, understanding of children, and abusive behaviors. The following questions were posed: Who attends PA groups? What types of abuse problems do members have with their children? Were members, themselves, abused as children? Does attendance at PA reduce reported abusiveness and stress? Does attendance at PA increase coping skills, improve self-concept, and increase understanding of children?

A DESCRIPTION OF PARENTS' ANONYMOUS

The purpose of PA is to provide support-group services for families and to develop community awareness of child abuse and neglect. Parents' Anonymous assumes that most abuse stems from three underlying factors: unresolved issues from abusers' childhood, current unmet needs, or a stressful precipitating event. The program provides confidential telephone counseling and self-help support groups to family members with actual or potential physical, emotional, or sexual abuse problems. The goal of the program is to prevent abusive behavior.

The PA groups are co-led by a chairperson and a sponsor. The chairperson is a parent with abuse problems who is drawn from the ranks of the group. The sponsor is not an abuser and is usually, but not always, a mental health professional who enjoys parenting. The sponsor's role is to facilitate the group process. The group provides a supportive environment by listening, giving suggestions, and creating a network (e.g., exchanging telephone numbers, babysitting for each other).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were members in PA groups in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There are three types of PA groups, and participants were distributed as follows: 47 were in groups for physically abusive parents, 27 were in groups for sexually abusive parents, and 8 in abuse groups for elderly parents who perceive themselves to have been abused or mistreated by their adult children.

Procedures

Participants were given a written self-report assessment developed by the national PA organization. This was administered during a regular PA group meeting, and members spent approximately 20 minutes completing the assessment. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was ensured.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using frequency distributions, correlations, and chi-square statistics. Because the assessment was administered to a national sample, it was possible to compare local results to the national findings.

RESULTS

Who Attends PA Groups?

Of the members, 75% were women and their mean age was 33. Compared to the national sample, which was 83% women with a mean age of 29.3, the local group attracts a higher percentage of men and older people. The ethnic distribution of the sample was 71% White, 13% Black, with the remainder reporting other ethnic backgrounds. Compared to the national sample, which reported 69% White and 4% Black, the local program includes a higher proportion of Blacks. The mean educational level of the sample was 12 years, and 30% reported they had attended some college.

Fifty-seven percent of the sample was married, 20% divorced, 5% separated, 17% single, and 1% widowed. Compared to the national sample, the local sample had more single people and fewer separated or married people. The mean number of children

was 2.4, compared to 2.6 in the national sample.

Most memberships were voluntary (89%) rather than court ordered (11%). The percentage of children removed from their homes by court order (19%) was similar to the percentage in the national sample (21%).

The income distribution of the sample was higher than the national sample, with 27% of the Milwaukee sample reporting an income over \$20,000, compared to 7% in the national sample. Conversely, 41% of the Milwaukee sample reported an income of under \$10,000, compared to 47% of the national sample. These findings indicate that the Milwaukee PA program attracts a higher income group than the national average.

What Types of Abuse Problems Do Members Have with Their Children?

Twenty-one percent of the members reported problems with sexual abuse; 60% reported verbal abuse, 44% physical abuse, 38% emotional abuse, and 9% physical neglect. Aside from sexual abuse, Milwaukee PA members reported lower percentages of abuse than did the national sample.

Were Members Abused As Children?

Members were abused as children. Seventy-one percent reported some form of abuse, and 28% reported having been sexually abused. The mean number of types of abuse reported was 3 out of a possible 5.

Does Attendance at PA Reduce Reported Abusiveness and Stress?

More than 80% of the members reported that attending PA resulted in

improvement in their ability to cope with stress. Of the members, 29% reported daily verbal abuse before attending PA, compared to 5% after attending. Similarly, members reported a reduction in weekly verbal abuse (23% before PA; 18% after), daily physical abuse (18% before PA; 3% after). Higher percentages of parents reported monthly verbal abuse (13% before PA; 19% after) and physical abuse (11% before; 18% after). Verbal abuse was reported as more prevalent than physical abuse both before and after attending PA sessions. There was no relationship between the number of months in PA and daily stress level or coping skills.

What are the Outcomes of Participation in PA?

Increased Coping Skills. Perceived level of stress was not related to actual abusiveness; however, perception of lower stress was related to positive self-concept ($r = .51$; $p < .05$), positive feelings about parenting ($r = .27$; $p < .05$), and positive feelings about children ($r = .36$; $p < .05$). Similarly, better coping skills were related to abusiveness, positive self-concept ($r = .53$; $p .05$), positive feelings about parenting ($r = .36$; $p .05$), and positive feelings about children ($r = .37$; $p .05$).

Improved Self-Concept. With regard to members' feelings about themselves, themselves as parents, and their children, members reported positive feelings about all three. But the length of time in PA was not related to these feelings.

Increased Understanding of Children. Questions were posed regarding members' basic understanding of children. Many of the members did not understand child development, as indicated by a mean 7.6 correct responses an-

swered out of 11 basic questions about child development. In addition, members were asked for their perceptions of how well they believe they understand child development. There was no relationship between members' beliefs about their understanding of children and their actual understanding.

To further explore factors related to members' understanding of child development, several exploratory analyses were performed. The only variable related to understanding of child development was grade level completed, indicating that parents with more education generally have greater understanding of children ($F = 2.20$; $df = 9$; $p < .05$). There was a significant, though low, correlation between number of months in PA and understanding of children ($r = .24$; $p < .05$), such that the higher the number of months in PA, the better the understanding of children.

CONCLUSION

Parents Anonymous participants varied in sex, ethnic background, income, and marital status. The prototypical member would be a 33-year-old, married, White woman, who was attending voluntarily. Quite likely, she was abused as a child. She would have 2 or 3 children.

Most of the PA members were coping with verbal abuse toward their children, almost one-half with physical abuse, and almost one-fourth with sexual abuse. They perceived their greatest problems as being verbal and emotional abuse. The longer members attend PA, the better they understand their children. Members with less stress have fewer abuse problems and more positive feelings about themselves and their children. Thus,

PA is responding to the needs of members through its focus on stress as a cause of abusive behaviors.

The findings are mixed on whether or not attendance at PA reduces reported abusiveness and stress and increases coping skills, self-concept, and understanding of children. Although 81% of the members reported improvement in stress level as a result of attending PA sessions, there was no relationship between length of time attending PA and stress level or coping skills. Members did report a reduction in frequency of verbal and physical abuse after joining PA; however, this finding must be viewed with caution because it reflects members' perception of their previous and present abusiveness, rather than an observation of their actual behavior. Attendance at PA sessions is not related to participants' self-concept, feelings about being a parent, or feelings towards their children. The findings about understanding of child development indicated that participants were not knowledgeable about this subject. There was no relationship between PA members' beliefs about their understanding of children and their actual understanding. This finding confirms earlier research that abusive parents hold unrealistic expectations of their children (Alford et al., 1985). A clear implication for groups of abusers is to focus on activities that will increase members' understanding of child development.

Thus, PA seems to be meeting a need, but the findings are inconclusive. Members report reduction in stress because of attending PA sessions, but there was no significant statistical relationship between length of attendance and stress reduction. Perhaps making the commitment to attend a self-help group or using the informal social networks

(an important part of PA) reduces stress rather than actual attendance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations for school counselors are warranted:

1. School counselors should become aware of the community agencies that target abusers of children. Through greater awareness, counselors can more effectively make appropriate referrals and identify victims of abuse.

2. Because students' behavior in school can be affected dramatically by an abusive home environment, school counselors could initiate counseling programs for students experiencing different types of abuse—verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Through counseling, students can learn coping skills and strategies for strengthening their self concepts.

3. With school counselors' special training in child development, they know how to lead support and educational groups for children and parents. Counselors could work collaboratively with community agencies to develop community resources for families with problems of abuse.

4. School counselors could work with community agencies to educate parents on realistic expectations about child development.

5. When programs are established, school counselors could lead the efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions for students and parents.

In conclusion, school counselors and counselors in community agencies must coordinate their efforts to reduce the abuse of children. Through program evaluation and greater articulation be-

tween counselors working with parents and their children, such a goal can be achieved.

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Author's Note. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the staff of Parent's Anonymous of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for assistance in data collection and comments on drafts of this article.

