

2020

36th IARIW General Conference

Paper Prepared for the 36th IARIW General Conference, Oslo, Norway, August 24-28, 2020

Improve Children's Non-Cognitive Skills through Parenting Training: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial among Chinese Immigrant Parents in the U.S.

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Background and Purpose:

Non-cognitive skills are broadly defined as personal traits as well as social-emotional and behavioral patterns and competencies that are developed across the lifespan of individuals. Non-cognitive skills have been demonstrated as critical in children's development and predictive of outcomes through childhood to adulthood, including academic performance, educational attainment, interpersonal relationships, health, employment, financial stability, and criminal activities. Besides the impact of school environment, parents play an important role in the development and improvement of children's non-cognitive skills.

Meanwhile, parenting skills and practices, especially those of immigrant parents, have received increasing attention in recent years. Largely due to the disruptions in their social support network as well as the stress and struggles in their own life, many immigrant parents rely on their traditional practices of child discipline, especially in dealing with their children's behavior problems. Moreover, the traumatized separations and disrupted attachments experienced by immigrant parents and children have received increasing attention from the media and local communities, including those of so-called "satellite babies" who were sent to their parents' home countries as infants/toddlers to be cared for by extended family members until school ages. However, few interventions have been designed and rigorously evaluated to help immigrant parents improve parenting skills in coping with children's behavior problems.

This study investigates the impact of Operation Parenting, an 8-week social group model that has been designed and implemented among Chinese immigrant parents to provide culturally enriched support and help parents improve their parenting skills and coping with the behavioral issues of their children. The research aims in this study are to examine whether Operation Parenting has significantly improved parents' parenting practices and children's non-cognitive skills, and whether the improvement in children's non-cognitive skills, if any, can be attributed to the improvement in parents' parenting practices.

Methods:

This randomized controlled trial (RCT) recruited Chinese immigrant parents who were concerned by their children's behavior problems using a convenience sampling method in a Chinese community in New York City. Parents were randomly assigned to the intervention group to participate in the upcoming Operation Parenting groups or to the control group to be on the waiting list for the next Operation Parenting groups after the data collection for this study. Pre- and post-test data were collected in both intervention and control groups. There were 116 parents who had non-missing data on outcome measures.

The outcome measures on parents' parenting skills and practices include positive parenting (i.e., self-efficacy and nurturance, which measure attitudes and behaviors related to warmth, affection, and support toward children) and harsh parenting (i.e., psychological aggression, physical assault, and neglect). Children's non-cognitive skills are measured by social-emotional and behavioral outcomes, including antisocial behaviors, anxiety/depression, immature/dependency, peer conflict, and overall internalizing and external behavior problems. OLS regressions are conducted to examine the effects of Operation Parenting on parents' parenting practices and children's social-emotional and behavioral outcomes, controlling for parent, child, and household characteristics. A mediation is further conducted to examine whether the improvement in children's social-emotional and behavioral outcomes can be attributed to the improvement in parents' parenting practices.

Results:

Preliminary results show that, compared to parents in the control group, parents in Operation Parenting have significantly improved parental self-efficacy and nurturance and reduced harsh parenting. Children of parents in the intervention group also have significantly lower antisocial behaviors, anxiety/depression, and overall externalizing behavior problems compared to children of parents in the control group. A mediation analysis shows that a large proportion (approximately 20%) of the reduction in children's antisocial behaviors and anxiety/depression measures can be attributed to the reduction in parents' use of harsh parenting as a result of their participation in Operation Parenting.

Conclusions and Implications:

As an RCT, this study provides rigorous evidence on improving children's non-cognitive skills through a parenting training program, Operation Parenting, among Chinese immigrant parents in the U.S. Operation Parenting shows significant effects on the improvement in parents' self-efficacy and positive parenting behaviors, as well as the reduction in their harsh parenting practices and their children's social-emotional and behavioral problems. Given that only parents but not children participated in Operation Parenting, the finding from a mediation analysis suggests that parenting skills and practices, which can be improved through parenting training programs, are key rather than peripheral to their children's non-cognitive development.

Operation Parenting has been developed and implemented by clinical social workers based on their long-time work experiences with immigrants in their own communities. Implemented in a group setting, Operation Parenting has low cost, especially compared to individual and family counseling, and can be easily expended to other social service agencies through the training of group leaders and facilitators. The findings can inform researchers, social workers, and other human service practitioners about providing culturally competent services to better serve the rapidly growing immigrant communities.