

“I Want to be a Better Parent:”  
Examining an Applied Approach to an Undergraduate Parent-Child Course

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**ABSTRACT.** This study explores the effects of an undergraduate parent-child relations curriculum designed to integrate instruction of developmental and parenting theory into an applied, skill-based parenting framework. It was hypothesized that students in the applied teaching group would demonstrate significantly more improvement in effective parenting behaviors from pre-test to post-test than control group students who were enrolled in a traditional text-based course. The results suggested the 10 week curricula positively impacted the parenting skills of treatment group participants (N = 54), but not control group participants (N = 25), as evidenced by blind, quantitative coding of responses to hypothetical parent-child scenarios.

As an instructor of an undergraduate parent-child relations course, I frequently ask students during the first session to indicate why they chose this class, and how they anticipate using the class content after the quarter ends. Every time I have asked, the vast majority of my students have indicated that, at the conclusion of the class, they wanted to either be a better parent or help someone else to be a better parent. Their responses are not particularly surprising, given that “being a better parent” is perhaps the most natural and obvious application of material from a parenting and family relations course.

However, a cursory review of available college-level family texts suggests that the instruction of parenting skills is not typically an explicit focus; rather, parenting skills are often considered the domain of community parenting education programming. College level family interaction texts and classes instead emphasize developmental theories, parenting frameworks, and empirical studies related to children and parents. Although those areas do indeed represent important bodies of scholarship in the parent-child domain, and thus appropriately occupy a central role in a university course, the present study is based on the premise that students’ parenting skills can be significantly improved by utilizing an applied, skill-based text and specifically integrating developmental theory, parent-child conceptual frameworks, and empirical studies into the curriculum.

### An Applied Curriculum

“Applied curriculum” here refers to both the material communicated and the manner of communication. Specifically, I propose a curriculum that includes (a) *developmental theory*, emphasizing the appropriate role of parents from each theoretical perspective and (b) *research-supported parenting conceptual frameworks*, specifying from both dimensional and typological

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frameworks the salient aspects of parenting, discussed throughout (c) a *skill-based parenting program*, which identifies the specific parenting behaviors that are related to children's well-being. In addition to a commitment to instruct in, and connect across, these three areas, the applied curriculum provides opportunities for student-led discussion and presentations as well as for hands-on practice of skills such as role-playing of hypothetical scenarios.

### *Developmental theory*

A variety of “grand” theoretical perspectives have provided insight into parental attributes and behaviors that are likely to positively impact children's development. These theorists are generally discussed in traditional family texts, and it is indeed helpful for students to consider how the mechanisms that govern development in general apply to the specific parent-child relationship. For example, Freud (1920) emphasized parents' management of children's instinctual drives, while Erikson (1963) suggested the need for positive environmental response to children's psychosocial stage crises, including the need to develop trusting relationships and be given opportunities for initiative. Bronfenbrenner (1979) pointed to the central role of the family microsystem, and additionally indicated that members of the family microsystem can interact with members of other proximal systems (i.e. school, peers) to produce a mesosystem that, in turn, is related to children's well-being. Theorists from a traditional learning theory perspective (e.g., Skinner, 1978) suggested the importance of reinforcement of appropriate behavior, which parents are in an ideal position to enact. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) added to that the role of parents as models of appropriate behavior, suggesting also the need for parents to monitor the models children witness elsewhere. By learning about Piaget's (1936) stages of children's cognitive development, students can become aware of the need for parents to understand the developmental stage of their child, provide an appropriate environment, and avoid pushing the child to achieve things beyond their current cognitive capacities. Through Vygotsky's (1935/1978) socio-cultural theory, students are exposed to the potential role of parents in identifying the zone of proximal development for their children with regard to a particular task, and of scaffolding children's efforts at mastery. In summary, developmental theory provides an important foundation for an exploration of the parent-child relationship.

### *Parenting conceptual frameworks*

The various theories of development mentioned above have important far-reaching implications for parenting. However, it is important to also enhance students' knowledge of parenting frameworks, or mid-range theories, that are focused specifically on the mechanisms at work in the parent-child context. One parenting framework that has occupied a central role in the research literature is Baumrind's (1971) typological approach. From this perspective, authoritative parents are those who are both responsive and demanding. Much research suggests that the authoritative style of parenting is associated with positive child and youth outcomes in a variety of domains (Baumrind, 1991; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991).

A second parenting framework that warrants inclusion in an undergraduate course emerged from the early work of Schaefer (1965) and Becker (1964), as well as the later work of Barber and colleagues (Barber, 1997; Barber, Stolz & Olsen, 2005) and Steinberg and colleagues (Steinberg, 1990). This framework is the dimensional approach that specific parenting

dimensions have specialized relationships with specific areas of youth functioning. From this perspective, three key dimensions of parenting are highlighted that have been found to predict youth functioning in a variety of cultures: parental support, behavioral control, and psychological control. (Barber et al., 2005).

### *Parenting skills*

In the applied curriculum under present consideration, developmental grand theories and parenting conceptual frameworks are discussed within a skill-based approach. In terms of justifying the inclusion of specific parent behaviors in the curriculum, there is widespread agreement that parenting behaviors impact children in meaningful ways and that effective parenting behaviors can be taught and learned (Britner & Reppucci, 1997; Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Baydar, 2004). Parent training programs have been shown to increase parents' feelings of empathy and to help the parents establish better relationships with their children (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001; Kerr, 2001). Several studies have found that parent training resulted in a decrease in negative parenting behaviors (Britner & Reppucci, 1997; Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Baydar, 2004). Additional studies have found fewer conduct problems for the children of parents who completed parent training (Hartman, Stage, & Webster-Stratton, 2003; McKenzie & Bacon, 2002; Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Beauchaine, 2001; Wolfe and Haddy, 2001). One longitudinal study (Reid et al.) showed that, one year after the completion of parenting classes, mothers in the intervention were observed to be more positive, less critical, more consistent, and more competent in their parenting than control mothers. In addition to studies conducted with married parents, there have been studies that researched the impact of parent education after separation/ divorce. Two studies (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; McKenzie & Bacon, 2002) have shown that parent education after separation or divorce can reduce parent conflict and improve child well-being.

In sum, given the importance of parenting and the research suggesting that parenting can be improved through direct instruction, the applied curriculum is an effort to explicitly target and improve the current and potential future parenting of college students. To accomplish this, I emphasize hands-on parenting skills and consistently utilize developmental and parenting theory as well as empirical studies to evaluate each taught skill and to investigate why, and in what contexts, each taught skill is of benefit to children and adolescents.

### Treatment Curriculum

The students in the treatment curriculum used a parent education book, *The Parent's Toolshop* (Pawel, 2000) as the primary required text for their 10-week parenting course. This text is designed to teach parents and family service professionals a decision-making model and practical skills for preventing or effectively responding to child management challenges. This text is engaging and easy to read, with many examples and personal stories. However, it is skill-based, with little explicit information regarding the theoretical underpinnings of specific parenting skills and limited references to empirical studies testing the child outcomes associated with the specified parenting behaviors. The required reading guides emphasize the first three levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (1996), tapping student knowledge, comprehension, and application of text material.

With this skill-based component as the primary text, the treatment curriculum then integrated research-based conceptual frameworks regarding the role of parenting in children's development (Barber, 1997; Barber, et al., 2005; Baumrind, 1971; Schaefer, 1965; Steinberg, 1990) and eight developmental theoretical perspectives commonly included in child development texts. Thus, the treatment curriculum intentionally built the material typically included in college level texts in the family field (i.e., social scientific theories, research methodology, and findings of empirical studies) into an applied framework, rather than building application opportunities into a theory and research-based framework. Each week, students read about and practiced hands-on relationship skills, and the instructor discussed in class the linkages between these skills and developmental and parenting theories as well as results of scholarship testing the effectiveness of the skills with various populations.

### Control Curriculum

The students who participated in the control curriculum studied parenting and family relations in a traditional format. The professor who taught the control group used a traditional college textbook. Students read approximately one chapter per week of the textbook, completed three exams, and wrote one research paper. The instructor of the control curriculum did not offer the students hands-on parenting skill instruction.

### Goal and Research Question

Overall, the goal of the treatment curriculum under investigation was to provide a rigorous, conceptual and theoretical foundation to the study of parents and children within the context of a hands-on skill-based approach. The goal of the present study is to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum innovation in impacting students' parenting skills.

It was hypothesized that parenting skills would increase within the treatment group, due to the explicit focus on parenting skills and behaviors, and the explicit linkage made between theoretical issues and parenting "tools" present in the treatment curriculum. While improvement in parenting skills was not the primary goal of the control curriculum, and was thus not specifically hypothesized, it is possible that students in the control group were able to make the linkages between the parent-child material they learned and its specific application on their own. If so, the control group would have also shown an increase in parenting skills between the pre-test and the post-test.

Specifically, this study sought to investigate (a) whether students' parenting skills improved over the 10-week quarter in the treatment and control groups, separately, and (b) whether the hypothesized increase in parenting skills in the treatment group was significantly different from any increase which might have occurred in the control group.

### Method

#### *Sample*

All students enrolled in two sections of a 300-level Parenting and Family Relations course at a mid-size Western university during the second week of a recent Winter quarter were eligible to

participate in this study. Students enrolled in one section, which was taught by the author (N=54), were exposed to the applied “treatment” curriculum. Students enrolled in a different section of this course, taught on a sister campus by a different instructor (N=25), were exposed to the “control” curriculum. Prerequisites for both sections of this course consisted of a 100-level Introduction to Psychology course and a 200-level Developmental Psychology course. Both the treatment and control courses lasted for 10 weeks and included approximately 33 hours of instructional time. Fifty of the 54 students initially eligible for treatment group participation (93%) and 24 of the 25 students initially eligible for control group participation (96%) participated in both the pre-test and the post-test data collection and were included in the present study. Students were offered extra credit points to be applied toward these or other psychology courses for their participation in the study.

Students were majoring in Psychology and/or Human Development (47% in treatment; 38% in control), Liberal Studies (48% in treatment; 53% in control), and other fields (5% in treatment, 9% in control). Eighty-three percent of the control group participants and 81% of the treatment group participants were female. The average age of participants in the treatment group (24.8 years) was not significantly different than that of the control group (28.3 years). Fifty-two percent of both the treatment and control groups were Caucasian. Hispanic / Latino was selected by 24% of the treatment group (32% of control), while 14% of the treatment group (8% of control) identified as African-American.

### *Evaluation Instrument*

To measure the effectiveness of parenting behaviors, both before and after the treatment and control curricula, the Outcome-Focused Parenting Skill Assessments instrument (Pawel, 1998) was modified. This instrument was designed to measure each of the following individual parenting skills, all of which were emphasized in the selected text.

*Problem ownership.* The parent’s ability to recognize when the child should be empowered to solve a problem (with support from the parent) as opposed to when the parent should take the lead in problem solving.

*Effective listening.* The extent to which the parent acknowledges and reflects the child’s stated or implied thoughts or feelings.

*Problem solving.* The extent to which the parent (a) assists children in solving problems that are theirs to solve (i.e., pertaining to peers, siblings, or emotions), and/or (b) leads the effort to solve problems that are parents to solve (i.e., issues related to health safety, and rules).

*Encouragement.* The extent to which the parent uses descriptive, positive statements, as opposed to criticism, labeling, or non-descriptive praise.

*Fostering independence.* The extent to which the parent provides opportunities for the child to practice and develop skills and responsibility.

*Fostering cooperation.* The extent to which parent shares power, offers choices, and/or engineers the environment to reduce disobedience and defiance.

*Handling intentional misbehavior.* The extent to which the parent recognizes the purpose behind intentional misbehavior and skillfully redirects the child.

*Clear communication.* The extent to which the parent uses clear, brief, respectful words to express concerns, avoiding blame or criticism.

*Appropriate discipline.* The extent to which the parent uses guiding discipline as opposed to

punishment.

*Anger/stress management.* The extent to which the parent manages and appropriately expresses his/her own anger and allows for appropriate expression of the child's anger.

One additional construct – parental identification of unintentional misbehavior – while clearly an important aspect of parenting, was deemed by the researchers to be much more subjective in nature, tied to the parent's understanding of the child's long-term and immediate history. As such, it was deemed by the researchers to be considerably less reliably measured via scenarios than the other components of effective parenting behavior. In short, it was difficult to design a scenario that ought to be interpreted by everyone as unintentional child misbehavior. Therefore, this particular targeted parenting skill was not measured.

The Outcome-Focused Parenting Skill Assessments instrument (Pawel, 1998) was originally designed for use by parent educators in measuring the effectiveness of *The Parent's Toolshop* curriculum with community samples. Pawel's original assessment tool includes three different seven-scenario surveys, each targeting a different age group, with an implicit parallel across age groupings. For example, scenario four from the Parenting Teens Assessment was written to tap the same fundamental parenting skill as scenario four on the Parenting Tots Assessment. Several of the scenarios were designed to tap multiple parenting skills, such that the full set of seven scenarios would allow a coder to obtain separate ratings on all the parental skill areas outlined above.

Eliminating one construct as indicated reduced the number of required scenarios to six. Since the treatment curriculum spanned all ages of children, two scenarios were chosen focusing on each of the three age groups (tots, tweens, and teens). Also, to reduce the test-retest effect, different scenarios were chosen for the pre-test than the post-test. Of the resulting 12 scenarios, 10 were taken directly from Pawel's (1998) original instrument, one was modified from that instrument, and one was created new. One sample scenario is, "You allowed your teen to borrow your car to drive to school. When you go to get in your car, you notice a dent in the driver's side door. *What would you say/do?*"

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

*Data collection.* Pre-tests were given to participants in both classes during the second week of instruction. Instructors allowed students 25 minutes to complete the survey. By administering the survey at the beginning of class, the desire to rush through and leave was reduced, and most students appeared to dedicate between 15 and 25 minutes to the survey. Post-tests tapping the same parenting skills, but with different scenarios were administered during the 10<sup>th</sup> week of class in the same manner as the pre-test.

*Scenario coding.* The original instrument was designed to be scored by one coder who was allowed to take into account subjective information (i.e., comments made in reading guides or in class) when scoring the post-test. Also, the coding scheme specified criteria for a score of 3-9, but scores of 1, 2, 10, and 11 were left to be subjectively determined by the coder. While these scenarios appeared to have face validity, the coding criteria seemed too subjective to yield adequate inter-rater reliability. Therefore, drawing from Pawel's (1998) original criteria, new coding criteria were established, ranging from one to eight and eliminating the subjective codes at the low and high ends of the scale.

Three undergraduate students were trained as coders for this project. All three student coders

had taken the Parenting and Family Relations class in a previous semester, and none of the coders was enrolled in the class at the time of the study. The timeframe of the project required that pre-tests were coded prior to collection of follow-up data; thus, the coders were aware that they were coding pre-tests. However, the coders were blind to the treatment vs. control status of the surveys they coded.

Due to the untested nature of this modified instrument, coders were initially given five surveys to code with a planned research team meeting to address any areas in which the criteria were vague or confusing. This resulted in a clarification of the coding criteria for several parenting skills. Following collection of post-test data, two of these three coders again coded a set of scenarios blind to treatment vs. control status. The third coder was unable to continue with the project; thus, the author served as the third coder for these treatment and control post-data. Although it is possible that the replacement of the initial coder between the pre-test and post-test altered the data (i.e., the replacement coder might have been overall more or less lenient in coding, or overall more or less true to the coding criteria) this would have presumably affected the control and treatment groups equally.

*Inter-rater reliability.* Inter-rater reliability of these individual scores was determined for each parenting skill by measuring the percentage of cases in which all three coders agreed and the percentage of cases in which two of three coders agreed across the entire sample for each of 10 items. These statistics are presented in Table 1. As Table 1 indicates, although there was consistently high 2-coder agreement across all items at both the pre-test and post-test, there was a noticeable increase in 3-coder agreement between the pre-test and post-test. It is possible that this reflects the replacement of the third coder between the pre-test and the post-test or a training effect of the remaining 2 coders. In sum, over all the coded scenarios, two or more raters agreed on their selected rating at least 96% of the time at the pre-test, and 100% of the time at the post-test. Although Cohen's kappa is generally considered a more robust measure of inter-rater reliability than a percentage of agreement calculation (because it takes into account agreement occurring by chance), this calculation is only appropriate for agreement between two raters. Since the consensus scores used as final measures in the present study are based on 3-coder or 2-coder agreement, it was more informative to use simple percentage of agreement calculations and report them for both 3-coder agreement and 2-coder agreement.

Table 1  
*Inter-rater Reliability*

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Parenting skill assessed</i>	<i>% 3-coder agreement</i>	<i>% 2-coder agreement</i>
Pre 1	Problem Ownership	43	97
Pre 1	Effective Listening	62	100
Pre 1	Problem Solving	34	100
Pre 2	Encouragement	58	99
Pre 2	Fostering Independence	47	96
Pre 3	Fostering Cooperation	30	99
Pre 3	Handling Intentional Misbehavior	37	99
Pre 4	Clear Communication	43	96
Pre 5	Effective Discipline	39	99
Pre 6	Anger / Stress Management	56	100

Post 1	Problem Ownership	95	100
Post 1	Effective Listening	99	100
Post 1	Problem Solving	97	100
Post 2	Encouragement	96	100
Post 2	Fostering Independence	100	100
Post 3	Fostering Cooperation	91	100
Post 3	Handling Intentional Misbehavior	92	100
Post 4	Clear Communication	92	100
Post 5	Effective Discipline	95	100
Post 6	Anger / Stress Management	93	100

*Consensus scores.* In cases in which all three coders agreed on a score for a particular participant on a particular item, that score was entered as the consensus score and used for future analyses. In situations in which only two of the three coders agreed on a score for a particular subject on a particular item, the score agreed on by two coders was used as the consensus score. In the relatively rare occurrence in which all three coders indicated different scores for a particular subject on a particular item (3 % of 1530 scores), the three numbers were averaged and rounded to the nearest whole number to determine the consensus score that was used in subsequent analyses.

*Scale construction.* Consensus scores were used to construct Effective Parenting Behavior (EPB) scales using all ten theoretically meaningful items at the pre-test (alpha = .64) and post-test (alpha = .83). Subsequent analysis indicated that the alpha level could not be substantially improved by eliminating an item, thus all 10 conceptually meaningful items were retained in each scale.

*Plan of analysis.* A repeated measures ANOVA was performed to provide a direct test of the primary study hypothesis, the interaction effect between treatment group and time with regard to EPB score. Subsequently, to address the remaining research questions, simple effects tests were performed to test for (a) pre/post EPB differences in the experimental group, and (b) pre/post EPB differences in the control group. Additionally, a simple effects test of treatment versus control EPB levels at the pre-test was performed to test for the presence of group differences on the pre-test.

## Results

Statistics for pre-test and post-test effective parenting behavior in the treatment and control groups are presented in Table 2. Results of the repeated measures ANOVA suggest a time by treatment interaction as hypothesized,  $F(1,72) = 16.539$ . The results of the simple effects tests indicate that for the treatment group, the post-test EPB mean (4.48) was significantly different than the pre-test EPB mean of 3.35 ( $p < .0001$ ). For the control group, results suggested that the pre-test (3.25) and post-test (3.52) EPB means were not significantly different. The third simple effects test indicated that the pre-test EPB means were not significantly different between the control and treatment groups. The treatment and control groups did not differ significantly in age, gender-based composition, or racial (i.e., Caucasian vs. minority) composition. Thus, the groups did not differ on any piece of demographic data I collected, so there was no need to enter any of those variables as covariates.



Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test and Post-test Effective Parenting Behavior in Treatment and Control Groups*

	Group		
	<u>Control</u>	<u>Treatment</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Pre-test	3.27(0.49) N=25	3.35(0.42) N=54	0.08 n.s.
Post-test	3.52(0.58) N=24	4.48(0.87) N=50	0.96 n.s.
Difference	0.25 n.s.	1.13*	

\*p<.001

## Discussion

Overall, these results suggest that the treatment curriculum positively impacted the students' effective parenting behaviors, as evidenced by their responses to hypothetical scenarios. The practical importance of this finding, however, is contingent on one's view of two distinct issues. First, it is beyond the scope of the present study to attempt to address the question of whether hands-on parenting skills should be included in a college-level course. A case was made in the initial review of literature that parenting behaviors have been linked to a variety of salient child and youth outcomes, presumably supporting an effort to instruct individuals on more effective and less effective parental behavioral choices. However, if one were to maintain the position that an applied, "how to parent" curriculum had no place in a college-level psychology course, one would naturally be unmoved by the finding that there was a significant impact on effective parenting behaviors within this sample. Others might argue that textbook knowledge of parenting and families is of very little subsequent personal or professional use to students if it has not resulted in the ability to make better behavioral choices in one's own family context and/or support and guide others in their efforts to do so.

A second point on which the importance of these findings hinge concerns the integrity of the selected applied text and the resulting targeted parenting behaviors. Each of the 10, measured parenting behaviors is supported by, and specifically linked with, multiple grand theories and parenting frameworks. Thus, the chosen text and resulting targeted skills and parenting behaviors appear to be face valid. However, if one were to fundamentally disagree with the philosophical underpinnings of the *Parent's Toolshop* curriculum, one would likely be unmoved by the findings that we were able to significantly change the extent to which students' responses to hypothetical situations reflected the goals and techniques of this particular approach. Although the text chosen is research-based, eclectic, comprehensive, user-friendly, and engaging, it is not the only parent education curriculum suitable for use in framing a college level course.

This study is limited in several ways which warrant both mention in the present manuscript as well as attention in future investigations. First, it would have been ideal to code the scenarios blind to pre-post status; however, we needed to work around the availability of the student coders and the timeframe of the overall project. Thus, it is possible that there was a tendency to use lower scores when coding the pre-tests and higher scores when coding the post-tests; however, this tendency, if present, would presumably impact the control and treatment groups equally.

Additionally, it is possible that differences between the control and treatment groups that are unrelated to the curriculum itself contributed to the improvement in effective parenting behaviors in the treatment group. For example, the courses were taught by different instructors, and the control group course met only once a week while the treatment course met twice a week (although the total instructional time was the same). Also, this is a relatively short-term study; future studies should follow-up with students six months (or more) past the end of the quarter to determine how much of the increase in effective parenting behaviors remains after the course is over and the novelty of the new ideas is diminished. In addition, it will be important for future studies focusing on the effectiveness of an applied parenting course to investigate not only change in effective parenting behaviors, but also knowledge of research-based parenting frameworks, child developmental theories, and key bodies of research findings pertaining to parenting and children. In other words, it is important that a focus on effective parenting behaviors not simply replace the traditional domains of knowledge communicated in a university course.

The substantial change in reliability of the effective parenting behavior scale from pre-test to post-test suggests that the participants' skill levels across the various items were more similar at the end of the study than at the beginning. The relatively small size of the control makes it difficult to investigate this disparity further with the present data. However, less-than-optimal measurement should reduce the likelihood of finding a significant change from pre-test to post-test, and yet one was found. Lastly, the outcome under investigation here was effective parenting as evidenced by hypothetical scenarios. Whether or not these students would evidence improved behavioral interactions with children was not specifically measured.

In sum, this study is grounded in the belief that improving student's parenting and general relationship behaviors is extremely important, particularly for students who anticipate working with children and families in the future, as many of our students do. Although the present study did not measure observed parenting behavior, I believe that offering students more effective parenting scripts, along with the theory and research that support them, in turn enhances the probability of effective parental behavioral choices.

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