

Evaluating “Parent Project.” A Multi-Site Inquiry

Heidi E. Stolz, Ph.D
University of Tennessee

Liliana Vargas
California State University San Bernardino

Lisa M. Clifford
University of Wisconsin

Heather A. Gaedt
California School of Professional Psychology

Claudia F. Garcia
California State University San Bernardino

ABSTRACT. This study evaluates Parent Project®, a parent education program for parents of at-risk adolescents. A logic model was created to highlight the relationship between program theory and measured constructs. Results comparing pre-workshop data with Week 10 data suggested significant increases in parent-reported parental support, parental behavioral control, and youth achievement, and significant decreases in youth antisocial behavior. Youth reported significant increases in maternal and paternal support and maternal behavioral control and significant decreases in antisocial behaviors.

Studies suggest that children and adolescents do best when parents support them, spend quality time with them, avoid harsh punishment, and emphasize communication (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Furthermore, Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, and Dornbusch (1991) found that adolescents who described their parents as authoritative scored higher on measures of psychosocial competence and lower on measures of psychological and behavioral dysfunction. Additionally, Barber, Stolz, and Olsen (2005) reported that parental support, behavioral control, and a lack of psychological control were consistently predictive of adolescent externalizing and internalizing behaviors across 11 diverse national-ethnic groups.

Due to the plethora of studies over the past three decades suggesting the critical role of parents in children’s lives, the number of parent education programs available in the United States has increased (Barlow & Brown, 2001). While it is encouraging that so many parent education programs are now available to help parents acquire the skills that might, in the end, benefit their children, it is very important that these programs are subjected to evaluation. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to provide a logic model and quantitative evaluation of one such program, “Parent Project,” a parent education program currently operating in 38 states for parents of at-risk and/or court-referred youth.

Direct correspondence to Dr. Heidi Stolz hstolz@utk.edu.

Program Overview and Conceptual Frame

Established in 1987 by a law enforcement officer, an adult educator, and a clinical psychologist, Parent Project is a 10- to 16-week, behavior-modification-based parenting program for self- and system-referred parents of at-risk or out-of-control youth. Parent Project was developed by soliciting and responding to parents' questions about their at-risk adolescents. The program targets parents whose adolescents exhibit behaviors such as running away, drug and/or alcohol use, poor school attendance, or violence (Fry, Johnson, Melendez, & Morgan, 2003). Consisting of two parts, Parent Project is designed to "help parents effectively demonstrate their love for their children, ensure parents experience early success, encourage parents to stay with the process, teach intervention/prevention strategies, and improve parent/child relationships" (Fry et al., 2003, p. 9).

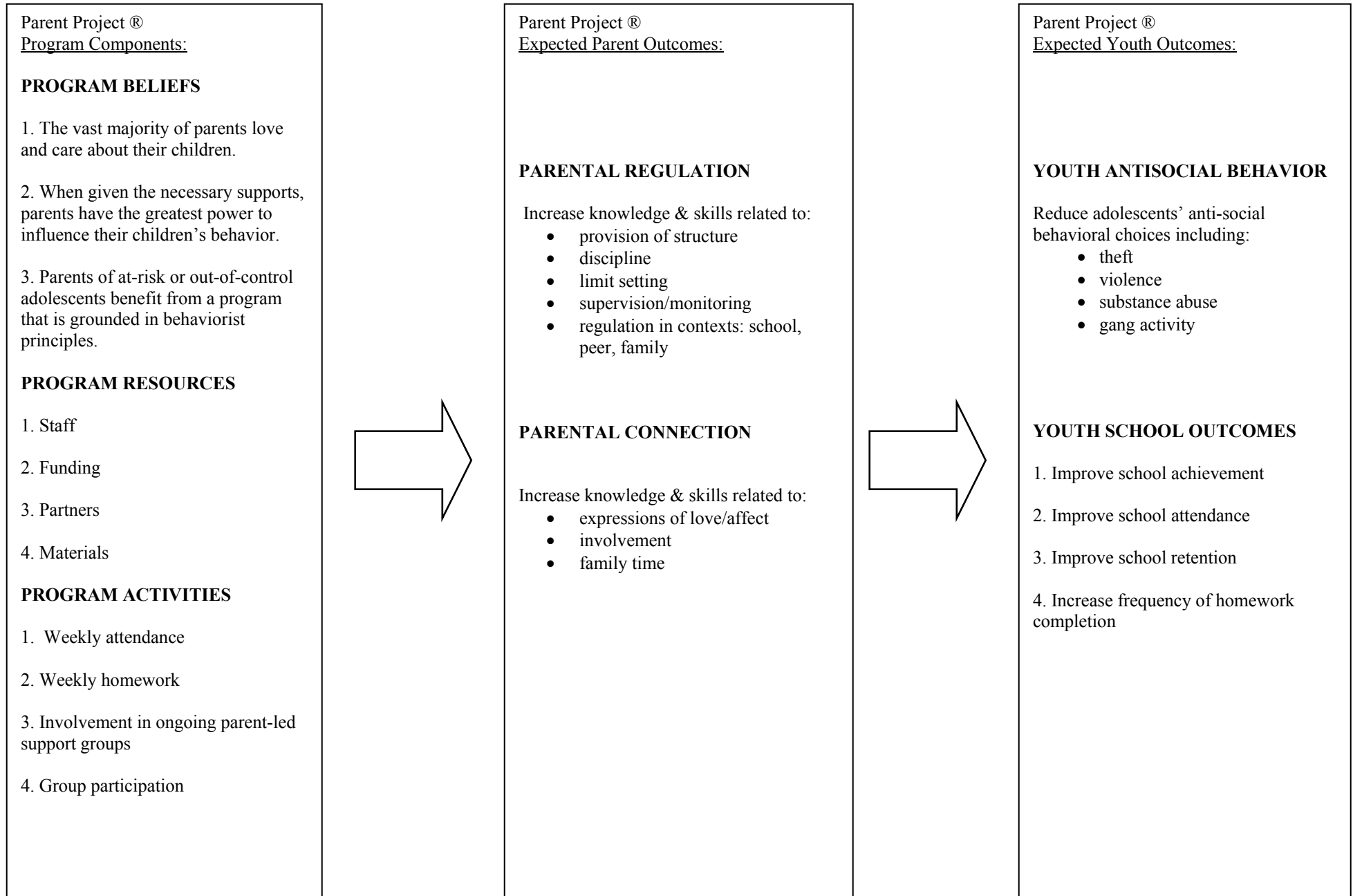
Part 1 of the program educates parents on the core curriculum. During each of these sessions, the trained facilitator leads parents through the unit curriculum in an effort to help parents learn to understand their children and address problematic behavior. Small support groups of four to five parents remain intact throughout these weeks. Part 2 of the program focuses on supporting change and encouraging parents. At Week 8, two small support groups meld and become a larger support group of eight to 10 parents. The material in weeks 8 through 10 is again delivered by the facilitator, and provides opportunities for parents to practice and refine skills and to begin to form autonomous "Mutual Support Groups" in keeping with the UCLA Model (California Self-Help Center at UCLA, 1985). Weeks 11-16 are optional, but recommended, and are led by trained facilitators or by parents. Parent-led support groups frequently continue after Week 16, utilizing a structured support group format. One such group in Honolulu has continued to meet for four years.

Parent Project is grounded in the principles of behavior modification. Thus, the program places low initial emphasis on youth insight and much more emphasis on appropriate parental control to change youth behavior. It is anticipated that youth attitudinal change will follow youth behavioral change (Fry et al., 2003). Parent Project facilitators teach parents to influence their children and motivate them to change their own behavior via positive strokes, positive consequences, and negative consequences. Altogether, Parent Project's goal is to empower parents, through instruction of effective strategies ("predictable interventions," Fry et al., p. 9) that can be applied to nearly all populations and are based on behavioral concepts.

Parent Project Program Theory

A logic model illustrates the logical flow between a Parent Project's program's essential components and goals. It therefore provides a visual depiction of the program theory, and serves as a useful framework for program evaluation (Millar, Simeone, & Carnevale, 2001; Savaya & Waysman, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates our research team's representation of Parent Project's essential components, anticipated parent outcomes, and anticipated youth outcomes. As indicated, the primary parent-related program objectives include (a) enhancing parenting skills related to connection with youth and (b) enhancing parenting skills related to regulation of youth. These direct outcomes are hypothesized to indirectly impact adolescent's choices with regard to antisocial behaviors and school-related outcomes.

Figure 1. Parent Project logic model



Thus, Parent Project attempts to provide parents with specific tools to help them connect with and regulate their youth. To foster a stronger connection with their adolescents, Parent Project facilitators teach participants a variety of ways to show love/affect, to be involved positively in the life of their child, and to create and value family time. Examples of skills taught include direct, daily, verbal expressions of love; physical affection such as hugging, kissing, and patting on the back; and indirect expressions or indications of love such as writing a love note or cooking for one's children.

In addition to the emphasis on connection-fostering behaviors, Parent Project facilitators also teach a variety of tools to increase parents' ability to regulate their youth. For example, they teach parents to consider and inquire about the "5 Ws" (Fry et al., 2003, p. 30) representing "Who," "What," "Where," "When," and "Why" about their adolescents' activities. They also teach parents how to involve youth in creating the rules that will govern the adolescent's participation in each requested activity, and to occasionally "Spot Check" (p. 30) to see if their adolescents are doing what they claimed to be doing. "Child's List" (p. 37), another tool suggested in the Parent Project curriculum, involves parents creating a list of things their child enjoys doing that will serve as rewards for appropriate behavior.

It is anticipated that these parental outcomes will subsequently contribute to the youth outcomes indicated in Figure 1, specifically decreased antisocial behaviors and improved school-related outcomes.

Review of Literature Related to Program Theory

Research supports the program theory as reflected in the logic model depicted in Figure 1. In correlational analyses, connection in the family environment, measured as perceived support from parents, has been predictive of school performance for samples of predominantly White fifth and eighth graders in Utah (Barber & Olsen, 1997), predominantly White and Asian American high school students in California (Herman, Dornbush, Herron, & Hertig, 1997), and predominantly Black seventh graders from Maryland (Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997). Additionally, Grolnick and Ryan (1989), Sanders (1998), and Connell and Wellborn (1991) all suggest a relationship between parental support/connection and youth school-related outcomes. Stolz et al. (2004) reported that of connection- and regulation-related behaviors from both parents and teachers, father's support was consistently among the most predictive variables in relation to adolescent school achievement across 10 diverse national-ethnic groups. Gregory and Weinstein (2004) indicated that adolescents' perceptions of parent connection and teacher connection contribute to an additive model, and both types of connection uniquely predict adolescents' academic achievement. Recent cross-national research also links parental support with concurrent and subsequent youth social initiative and (less) youth depression (Barber et al., 2005). Thus, the portion of the program theory in which an increase in parental support is expected to promote an increase in school achievement is well-supported in the academic literature.

Research also supports the role of parental regulation in the lives of adolescents, particularly suggesting linkages between parental regulatory behaviors and decreased antisocial behaviors. With regard to adolescent delinquency and other antisocial behaviors, recent research has indicated that a high level of parental behavioral control including monitoring and knowledge of adolescents' friends and activities has a "specialized relationship" (Barber et al., 2005, p. 57) with decreased antisocial behavior, suggesting that it is the most effective intervention target at the parental level. Specifically, Stolz, Barber, and Olsen (2005) indicated that maternal

behavioral control was relatively more important than all other measured parenting constructs (paternal behavioral control, maternal and paternal support, and maternal and paternal psychological control) in predicting subsequent adolescent antisocial behavior. Amato and Fowler's (2002) study of parenting practices in a nationally-representative, multi-ethnic U.S. sample also supports the link between parental monitoring and decreased subsequent behavior problems across diverse family contexts. Laird, Pettit, Dodge, and Bates (2003) also found this link to be consistent over time. Additionally, youth disclosure to parents of whereabouts and activities has been shown to buffer youth from initial alcohol use and alcohol misuse (Barnes, Reifman, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2000). In sum, Parent Project's program theory related to the anticipated relationship between increased parental regulation behaviors and decreased youth delinquent behaviors is also well-supported by existing research.

Research Questions

Given the Parent Project logic model specified above and the reviewed literature, the present study addressed the following research questions. At Week 10 of the Parent Project program:

- (1) Are parents engaging in more connection-related behaviors?
- (2) Are parents engaging in more regulation-related behaviors?
- (3) Has youth school achievement increased?
- (4) Have youth antisocial behaviors decreased?
- (5) Are program participants satisfied with the program?

Methodology

Pre-workshop and follow-up surveys of Parent Project workshop participants and their focal adolescents were used to gather quantitative data to address the research questions.

Site and Participant Selection

The on-site facilitators of all Parent Project workshops nationwide, scheduled to begin during an identified 6-week period were contacted and invited to have their site included in the present study, resulting in 13 eligible survey sites. All workshop facilitators agreed to participate; therefore, all sites were included in the study. These workshops were held in various locations within the United States (three workshops in each of California and Pennsylvania; two workshops in each of Florida, Idaho, and Ohio; and one workshop in Alabama). At each survey site, the onsite Parent Project facilitator invited workshop participants to take part in the study. Research participants were provided time during their first and tenth week meetings to complete pre- and post-surveys. As an incentive, all study participants were entered into a drawing for a new computer. To ensure the confidentiality of responses, participants were provided stamped, addressed envelopes and were instructed to return their surveys directly to the research team via mail. Participants were also provided with youth pre-program and follow-up surveys (again, with pre-addressed, stamped envelopes to be mailed directly to the research team) and were invited to have their target adolescent participate.

Initial surveys were received via mail from 127 participants, representing 98% of program participants present at week 1. The majority (76%) of the respondents were female and were an average 42.1 years of age ($SD = 8.7$). Fifty-seven percent of participants identified as European-American / White, 20% were Latino, and 10% were African-American. Of the 127 participating

parents, 42 attended with a spouse or partner who shared in their concern for the same focal adolescent, thus only 106 youth were offered the opportunity to participate in the study. A total of 71 of the potential 106 youth surveys were completed and returned. Forty-four percent of the adolescent respondents were female, and adolescent respondents were an average 14.1 years of age ($SD = 2.2$). Of the original 127 parents who participated in the study at week 1, 88 attended the week 10 workshop session. Follow-up parent surveys were received from 70 of these 88 parents (80%). Thirty-two of the youth who responded to the initial survey also responded to the follow-up survey. Analyses comparing participants who reported initial data only compared to those who participated in both waves revealed no differences on the constructs measured.

Measures

Parental support. The Acceptance subscale of the Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965) was used to assess youth report of mother's and father's support, a key parental commodity contributing to a state of relational connection (Barber et al., 2005). Youth rated each parent on a 3-point scale (1 = *not at all like her/him*, 2 = *somewhat like her/him*, 3 = *very much like her/him*) on a series of 10 items. Sample items include, "makes me feel better after talking over my worries with her/him" and "enjoys doing things with me." For the parent report of parental support, parents responded to the same items, reworded to reflect parental report of parenting. These items were averaged to construct three scale scores – youth report of mother's support, youth report of father's support, and parent report of parent's support of their adolescent.

Parental behavioral control. Regulation, like connection, is a state-like construct, and behavioral control is a key, parental contributor to the goal state (Barber et al., 2005). Parental knowledge of youth behavior, one component of parental behavioral control, was measured by a five item scale frequently used in family research with adolescents (e.g., Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993). Youth responded on a 3-point scale from 1 = *Doesn't know* to 3 = *Knows a lot* concerning how much their mothers and fathers (separately) "really know" (a) "Where you go at night," (b) "Where you are most afternoons after school," (c) "How you spend your money," (d) "What you do with your free time," and (e) "Who your friends are." Again, parents responded to similar, reworded items to measure parents' report of parental behavioral control. These items were averaged to create two youth report scales (one for mother and one for father) and one parent report scale.

Adolescent antisocial behavior. Antisocial behavior was measured by the Delinquent subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist – Youth Self-Report (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987). Response categories ranged from 0 = *not true* to 2 = *very true or often true*. Sample items include, "I steal things from places other than home," "I lie or cheat," and "I use alcohol or drugs for non-medical purposes." Parents, again, responded to similar items to measure parental reports of youth antisocial behavior. These items were averaged to construct parent-reported and youth-reported youth antisocial behavior scales.

Adolescent school achievement. Parental report of school achievement was measured with the one item, "Over the past month, how have your child's grades been in school?" Response categories ranged from 1 = *well below average* to 5 = *well above average*. Similarly, youth were asked to use the same response categories and respond to the item, "Over the past month, how have your grades been in school?" This item has been used by various researchers with good predictive validity (Stolz et al., 2004).

Participant satisfaction. Parental general satisfaction with the program was measured with five items including, “I learned new and useful information” and, “Overall, I am very satisfied with this training.” Response categories ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Analysis

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and scale reliabilities for all measures stemming from the pre-workshop and follow-up surveys are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. For the parenting and youth functioning scales, Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .78 to .96 for youth reports and .78 to .89 for parent report, thus we were able to measure all study variables with reasonable reliability.

(See Tables 1 and 2 on pages 11 and 12.)

Paired *t*-tests were used to evaluate whether parents and youth (separately) reported significantly different levels of parental support, parental behavioral control, youth antisocial behavior, and school achievement at week ten of the program compared to week one. One-tailed *t*-tests were used since all hypotheses were directional in nature.

Results

Parental Connection-Related Behaviors. Using parent-reported data, the results of paired *t*-tests suggest significant increases between week one and week ten measures of parental support, $t(70) = 4.55, p < .0001$. Youth reports also suggest significant increases between week one and week ten in mother’s support, $t(32) = 1.85, p < .05$ and father’s support, $t(29) = 1.94, p < .05$.

Parental Regulation-Related Behaviors. The results of paired *t*-tests also suggest significant increases between week one and week ten measures of parent-reported parental behavioral control, $t(69) = 3.62, p < .0001$. Youth reports suggest significant increases between week one and week ten in mother’s behavioral control, $t(31) = 2.36, p < .05$ but not father’s behavioral control, $t(29) = .80, p = .78$.

Youth school achievement. Parents also reported significantly higher levels of youth school achievement at week ten than at week one, $t(68) = 2.36, p < .05$; however, adolescents report the same average grade at both weeks, $t(31) = .00, p = .50$.

Youth antisocial behaviors. Parents reported a significant decrease between week one and week ten, youth antisocial behavior, $t(69) = 3.55, p < .001$, and adolescents also reported significant decreases in these behaviors, $t(31) = 2.00, p < .05$.

Participant satisfaction. General satisfaction with the content and format of the program was also assessed. Overall, parents ranked their satisfaction with the program as 4.54 / 5.00 on a program satisfaction scale, with 5 indicating high satisfaction.

Discussion

The Parent Project workshop participants who continued to participate in both the program and the research study through week ten reported quite positive results, as did their focal adolescents. Youth and parents report higher levels of parental support, and reviewed literature suggests that higher levels of parental support are predictive of higher levels of school achievement (Barber & Olsen, 1997) and prosocial engagement outside the home (Barber et al., 2005). Although youth do not report a significant change in grades over these 9 weeks, parents

do. We view youth report of grades as more valid than parent report; however, it is nonetheless noteworthy that parents are apparently feeling more hopeful about their adolescent's school achievement. Research by Taylor and Lopez (2005) suggests that these higher expectations might, in and of themselves, promote higher performance from adolescents over time.

Workshop participants also reported that they were engaging in higher levels of behavioral control at week ten than prior to the workshop, and youth agree that their mothers are, but report no significant change in their fathers' behavioral control. Recent evidence suggests that around the world, mother's behavioral control is uniquely (negatively) predictive of adolescent antisocial behavior (Barber et al., 2005; Stolz et al., 2005), thus it is important that after only 9 weeks, both participants and their youth agree that the level of this key, maternal variable has changed.

Youth and parents also report a corresponding decrease in antisocial behavior. While it was possible that this hypothesized outcome might have taken longer to appear, or that antisocial behavior might have even increased in the short-term as an initial reaction to the sudden increase in parental regulation, it is quite promising that behaviors such as stealing, swearing, hanging out with deviant peers, and using drugs and alcohol significantly decrease in the short-term. One of Parent Project's goals is to empower parents to stay with the process, and early success is a key element of that process.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

This study is limited in several ways. First, although we utilized a strong initial sampling frame (all Parent Project workshop attendees at all workshops in the United States taking place over a specified period), and obtained a high initial response rate (98%), our pre-post comparisons were based on participants who remained in the program at Week 10. Analyses comparing participants who reported initial data only compared to those who participated in both waves reveal no differences on the constructs measured. However, it is possible that parents who left the Parent Project program might differ from parents who remained in the program in some other way that was not measured in this study. Second, the impact of the program on these individuals after Week 10 was not addressed in the present study. We hope to be able to follow up with future Parent Project participants over a longer period of time. Last, these preliminary findings now support the dedication of resources to a control group design; however, the present study did not include random assignment of parents to treatment or control conditions.

Given these study limitations, future research on the effectiveness of this and other parent education programs should seek to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple informants at pre-intervention, post-intervention, and follow-up intervals. Also, one of the benefits of a "research – practice calibration" (Law, Stolz, & Wells, 2005, p. 1) in which a program theory is specified and compared with social scientific research findings, is that it identifies non-targeted potential outcomes of an intervention. The literature reviewed in the present manuscript relative to the Parent Project logic model suggests that the program might also significantly increase youth social initiative and decrease youth depression (Barber et al., 2005; Stolz et al., 2005), thus we suggest that these constructs be measured in future Parent Project evaluation efforts to potentially document non-targeted benefits of the program.

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Table 1

Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for Study Measures at Pre-Program Data Collection

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Parent Report										
1. Parental support	1.00									
2. Parental behavioral control	.29***	1.00								
3. Youth antisocial behavior	-.18*	-.57***	1.00							
4. Youth school achievement	.15	.17	-.29**	1.00						
Youth Report										
5. Maternal support	.53***	.30*	-.32*	.02	1.00					
6. Paternal support	.09	.05	-.01	.08	.10	1.00				
7. Maternal behavioral control	.20	.41***	-.23	.11	.29*	.12	1.00			
8. Paternal behavioral control	.08	.15	-.14	.15	.14	.65***	.32*	1.00		
9. Youth antisocial behavior	-.23	-.36**	.64***	-.28*	-.26*	-.08	-.14	-.23	1.00	
10. Youth school achievement	.14	.10	-.34**	.64***	.06	.21	.16	.27*	-.31**	1.00
<i>N</i>	127	127	127	125	70	61	69	63	70	69
<i>M</i>	2.46	2.55	.77	2.48	2.21	1.97	2.50	2.01	.64	2.72
<i>SD</i>	.40	.51	.46	1.33	.54	.61	.50	.78	.43	1.22
<i>α</i>	.86	.89	.78	n/a	.91	.93	.78	.93	.78	n/a

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alphas for Study Measures at Follow-Up Data Collection

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Parent Report											
1. Parental support	1.00										
2. Parental behavioral control	.45***	1.00									
3. Youth antisocial behavior	-.18	-.40***	1.00								
4. Youth school achievement	.22	.30*	-.30*	1.00							
5. Satisfaction with program	.19	.13	.15	.05	1.00						
Youth Report											
6. Maternal support	.44*	.38*	-.24	.28	.20	1.00					
7. Paternal support	-.09	-.07	-.23	.28	-.05	.58***	1.00				
8. Maternal behavioral control	.33	.37	-.35	.00	-.19	.30	.03	1.00			
9. Paternal behavioral control	.15	.03	-.07	.28	.02	.29	.54**	.50**	1.00		
10. Youth antisocial behavior	-.04	-.23	.52**	-.21	.16	-.28	-.39*	-.64***	-.56**	1.00	
11. Youth school achievement	.21	.18	-.18	.55**	.01	.26	.31	.14	.36	-.35	1.00
<i>N</i>	71	70	70	70	70	32	29	31	29	31	31
<i>M</i>	2.53	2.67	.62	2.71	4.54	2.42	2.19	2.59	2.10	.45	3.03
<i>SD</i>	.40	.41	.42	1.44	.74	.43	.66	.44	.81	.38	1.17
<i>α</i>	.89	.80	.77	n/a	.95	.85	.96	.78	.95	.78	n/a

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$