Social Work in Action

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Strengths-Based Approaches in Peer-Led Parenting Groups

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Abstract

Social Work in Action is a solicited column from the social work community in Hawai'i. It is edited by HJHSW Contributing Editor Sophia Lau PhD, of the Thompson School of Social Work and Public Health at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Abbreviations

ACEs = adverse childhood experiences
HOPE = Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences framework
PCEs = positive childhood experiences
SF PFF = Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework

Introduction

Parenting support groups can enhance parents' knowledge base, support active engagement in positive parenting practices, and link families to services and resources that are needed. Some parenting groups are led by a peer. These groups are thus facilitated by a non-professional, in a manner that emphasizes the facilitator is not a parenting expert but rather a peer who maintains shared characteristics or experiences with the group members. Empirical findings have shown the value of peer support including its unique role in promoting health and functioning for children and families. Moreover, when strengths-based frameworks inform programs that aim to improve family functioning and dynamics to prevent child abuse and neglect, an empowering narrative can be attached to the family which can result in more meaningful and effective partnership and outcomes. Peer facilitators are essential in supporting families through their process of change in the real-world context.[1] Although empirical investigations have been undertaken to understand peer facilitators' unique perspectives and experiences, an area that is also worthy of attention is the impact of parenting groups on peer facilitators. Peer-led parenting groups have the potential to impact the peer facilitators in ways that transcend their parent role and influence other social roles they maintain, hence, shaping their interactions in their social environment. An exploratory qualitative study will be conducted in partnership with Family Hui Hawaii, a non-profit organization in Honolulu, Hawai'i to examine the experiences of parent leaders and learn how have they been impacted by parenting groups. At Family Hui Hawai'i, peer-facilitators of parenting groups are referred to as Parent Leaders, and every program and service offered through Family Hui Hawaii is informed by the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (SF PFF) and the Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) framework.

Peer-Led Parenting Groups

Parents and other caregivers who provide direct care to children (*parents* hereon) play a powerful role in shaping childhood experiences. They support children's ability to flourish across health dimensions including their physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health.[2] In order for parents to optimize their role, they require support and resources.[2] It is also expected that peer facilitators of parenting groups receive training prior to leading a group, especially if the group is curriculum-informed. The peer facilitator's primary role is to create a safe space where diverse experiences can be shared and help facilitate focused dialogue, information-sharing, and support among group members. Although parenting groups vary in size, interventions focusing on parenting generally have 2 goals: (1) Directly improve the lives and wellbeing of parents; and (2) Indirectly improve the lives, wellbeing, and development of these parents' children.[1] In turn, these benefits can not only improve the wellbeing and functioning within the family system, but also transcend and impact the health of the community as a whole.[2]

Centering Strengths-Based Approaches in Parenting Groups

Hope and resiliency can be revived when strengths-based frameworks inform parenting groups. Strengths-based frameworks underscore the protective qualities of the caretakers and the social environment they help create; as well as emphasize the positive experiences and outcomes among children.[3] This means peer facilitators should be intentional and employ a positive lens when engaging with families, to help identify and strengthen the protective factors that can elevate the family's dynamics and overall wellbeing. When parents feel supported and are able to activate their protective factors, they maintain great capacity in providing their children with positive childhood experiences (PCEs). The SF PFF and HOPE frameworks are research-informed approaches that emphasize the importance of promoting positive childhood experiences and development, which then implies that there must be a focus on parents' experiences.[4]

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework (SF PFF)

The aim of the SF PFF is to increase family strengths to prevent and reduce the likelihood for child abuse and neglect. The 5 research-informed protective factors are: (1) Parental resilience: parent's stress response and ability to manage distress; (2) Social connection: positive relationships within the family as well as in the social environment that offers emotional, informational, tangible, and spiritual support; (3) Knowledge of parenting and child development: understanding child development and parenting strategies that support child development across the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health domains; (4) Concrete support in times of need; and (5) Social and emotional competence of children: family and children's interaction styles that support children's ability to regulate emotions, communicate effectively, and maintain healthy relationships.[5]

Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences Framework (HOPE)

When families' protective factors are strengthened and activated, PCEs can be enriched. When considering the childhood experiences continuum, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been examined extensively and are well-established as detrimental factors that can have long-standing impacts including disease risk factors and reduced quality of life.[6,7] However, solely focusing on ACEs may result in an inaccurate representation of child's experiences; resulting in misinterpretation of child's strengths and opportunities. Researchers have also directed attention to positive childhood experiences which have also been shown to influence brain development and health outcomes across the life span.[6,8] The following 4 research-informed PCEs are understood to be essential and interrelated experiences that highlight the parent and child relationship dynamic: (1) safe and supportive relationships within the family and social environment, (2) safe, equitable, and stable environments where children can live, learn, and play, (3) opportunities for social and civic engagement to develop connection and sense of belonging, and (4) opportunities for emotional growth that can equip them with skillsets to use when confronted with challenges.[4,9] PCEs have been linked to various health and social outcomes including better self-reported adult health and lower risk of mental and physical health conditions,[10,11] and various psychosocial outcomes like lower psychological distress, increased life satisfaction, and more social support.[11]

Next Steps: Community Partnership and Research Activity

The SF PFF and HOPE are research-informed approaches that overlap, and, when serving as the primary frameworks in parenting interventions, can empower families to promote positive outcomes that can enrich the entire family system. Empirical investigations on the experiences and impacts of peer-led parenting interventions have focused on group members' outcomes and less so on the peer facilitators. In general, there is limited understanding of peer facilitators' experiences in their dual roles as group leader and as parents. Parenting groups have potential to impact group members in ways that transcend their parent role and influence other social roles they maintain, hence, shaping their interactions in their social environment. These groups may also have the capacity to do the same for the peer facilitator but perhaps in different ways with respect to their dual role in the group. A study conceptualized by Dr. Sophia Lau and partners at Family Hui Hawai'i, a non-profit organization in Honolulu, Hawai'i will aim to explore the experiences and impacts of Parent Leaders in their role as peer facilitators of a strengths-based and curriculum-informed parenting group. We are humbled to learn from the Parent Leaders' perspectives and experiences which can help inform future practice, training, and research.

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