

Most of the June 2004 issue of Child Abuse and Neglect is devoted to articles about a randomized trial of Hawaii's Health Start home visitation program (HSP) by researchers (Duggan, McFarlane, Fuddy, Burrell, Higman, Windham and Sia) from John Hopkins School of Medicine, the John Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawaii and the Hawaii State Department of Health. These researchers followed 685 at risk families as identified by the usual HSP protocol for 3 years; 395 families were enrolled in Healthy Start and received home visitation services and 290 families were placed in the control group and did not receive home visitation services.

These families were tracked on a large variety of measures including official substantiation (of child abuse and neglect) rates and other unofficial measures of child abuse and neglect based mainly on parents' self reports and researchers' observations of parenting behaviors. Hospitalizations of children were also tracked, as well as maternal relinquishment of the primary caregiver role. Research staff who gathered information through interviews with parents were unaware of families' assignment to the experimental or control groups.

"Poor maternal general mental health, maternal substance abuse and partner violence were common at baseline in both groups because families had been targeted for service on the basis of such risks for child abuse." However, the control group had somewhat poorer maternal mental health and partner violence on average. "Over the 3 year follow up period, 89% completed at least two interviews and 81% completed all three."

"About one fifth of mothers reported being too caught up in their own problems to express love to their child." "About one in 12 had been unable to make sure the child had adequate food or needed medical care." One might regard these measures as indicators of physical or emotional neglect.

About half of mothers reported using minor physical discipline and / or screaming at or yelling at their infants in the first year of life." By the child's third year of life, about one in eight mothers reported hitting the child somewhere other than the bottom with an object and slapping the child on the face, head or ears." However, substantiated CPS reports were rare with only 23 out of 685 families being substantiated for child abuse or neglect. In other words, official rates of child abuse and neglect based on substantiated CPS reports were one third to one sixth of the rates that can be derived from the parents' self reports.

"The HSP and control groups did not differ significantly in the traditional categories of psychological aggression, minor physical assault, and severe physical abuse." "The HSP and control groups were similar for four of the five revised categories of abuse."

"The groups differed significantly on only a single item in this category -- threatening to spank or hit the child." The groups did not differ in the self reported frequency or severity of abusive behaviors. There were no significant differences in rates of neglect "as traditionally defined" though "There was a trend toward the HSP mothers being less likely to report being too caught up in their problems to show their child love." There was no difference in the groups on the maternal responsiveness HOME scale. "The groups were similar in substantiated CPS report rates;" 3.2% of HSP parents and 4.1% of parents in the control group had substantiated reports over the 3 years of the research project.

"Overall, 8.3% of HSP group mothers and 8.4% of control group mothers relinquished their role as a primary caregiver at some time in the child's first 3 years of life." "There was no difference between groups in the percent of mothers relinquishing care for 6 months or longer."

The authors comment "The sample's extremely low substantiated CPS report rate masks high rates of abusive and neglectful parenting behaviors ..." "... many acts traditionally categorized as psychological aggression and minor physical assault were common enough and related closely enough to be considered normative behavior in this group." Unfortunately, the researchers "found little program effect in preventing child abuse." "The HSP and control groups did not differ in indicators of severe abuse and we found little evidence in program records that home visitors were alert to mothers with the highest levels of abusive behavior, even mothers who were active in the program." In addition, "we found no differences in emotional responsiveness to the child through observation."

It is important to note that attrition rates in HSP were high with half of families dropping out of the program by the end of the first year; "home visit frequency was substantially lower than intended, even among active families." "Moreover, fathers took part in the intervention infrequently" despite the fact that" fathers had been assessed as at risk of child abuse in about two thirds of cases.

The authors believe that the program had little impact on child abuse and neglect because "The program focuses on families with multiple, complex risks for child abuse, but home visitor and supervisor training in these areas was scant and focused more on knowledge than skill building." "It is likely that home visitors lacked sufficient expertise and supervision to address family risks for abuse, motivate families to change, and link families with professional services."

The researchers found that HSP managers believed that the program had higher engagement rates than was the case. The researchers make comments regarding "program ambiguity" and speculate that HSP had lost an emphasis on risk reduction in favor of strengths based approaches to working with families. In particular, the lack of training and emphasis on substance abuse, domestic violence and depression may have led to the ineffectiveness of HSP, according to these authors.

These authors are straightforward and unapologetic in handling controversial themes. After provoking child advocates and the many thousands of persons involved in home visitation programs nationally, they end with some challenges for researchers. In commenting on the many uncontrolled studies of home visitation, they comment "It is invalid and misleading to claim causation without a control group, and a plethora of uncontrolled studies is no better than a single one in this regard."

In the lead article in this issue of Child Abuse and Neglect, Mark Chaffin asserts that "When it comes to establishing safety and effectiveness, there is simply no substitute for randomized trials." "Among scientific bodies whose business it is to evaluate research evidence, a small number of randomized trials, perhaps even a single large well - conducted randomized trial, is viewed as far more enlightening than a stack of studies using inferior methodologies." To add fuel to the fire, Chaffin claims that "child abuse prevention programs and other psychosocial initiatives have been based more on advocacy, theory, weaker program evaluation designs, fashion, guesswork and hope." "Too often, the (prevention) field has grasped at anything new and hopeful, without the difficult and time consuming intermediate steps involved in careful controlled field testing."

Chaffin comments that "Once taken to scale, once institutionalized and heavily funded, and once imbued with a sense of mission and mass commitment, programs take on lives of their own and subsequent hard data on program effectiveness are welcomed only if the news is good."

Chaffin asserts that the study I have already summarized "replicates prior findings suggesting that partner violence, substance abuse, and parental depression are robust risk factors for future maltreatment." Yet, these are the areas that many HS home visitors felt least equipped to manage and least effective in addressing." Finally, "in other words, if home visitors do not recognize what is important, and are not equipped to deal with it, it will not change and maltreatment rates will not be reduced." These comments can be applied to CPS /CWS social workers as well.