

The Effects of Parent Participation in Relationship/Marriage Education on Coparenting and Children's Social Skills: Examining Rural Minorities' Experiences

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Substantial evidence supports the salience of couple functioning in predicting adjustment and well-being in children (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Junntila, Vauras, & Laakkonen, 2007; Ladd, 1999). Researchers have found that conflict between parents is related to harsh parenting styles, which negatively affect children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development (Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; McDowell & Parke, 2009). Increasing evidence suggests children's behavior and attentive skills in the classroom can be negatively affected by parental conflict at home (Buckhalt, El Sheikh, & Keller, 2007). These and similar findings provide rationale for programmatic work that promotes healthy couple relationships for the purpose of promoting positive child outcomes. Extremely limited research has documented the effects of couple relationship programs on child outcomes (Cowan & Cowan, 2005).

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether parental participation in marriage and relationship education (RME) benefits preschool children's social competence and their parents' coparenting quality. Additionally, this study is an effort to expand studies of (RME) beyond populations of European American, married, and middle to higher income parents (Hawkins, et al., 2008). Our program and study targets minority couples and coparents whose children are in Head Start programs.

Sample

Data are from Head Start parents collected over 2 years who participated in the initial cohort of study and include the following demographic information: 93 adults of whom 66% were female and 34% male—71 are participants and 22 are controls. African Americans comprised 97% of the sample, and the other 3% of the sample are European American or biracial. The average age for participants was 32. Seventy-nine percent reported a household income of less than \$25,000; 17% reported \$25,000-\$39,999; 4% reported \$40,000+. Data were collected over 4 waves—initial/pre-test (0 months), post-test (1.5) months, and follow-up data (4 & 12 months). Ninety-six percent of participants and controls returned follow-up data from the previous year.

Procedures.

RME was delivered in 6 sessions to parents who voluntarily opted to participate in the *Together We Can* (TWC) curriculum (Shirer, Contraras, Adler-Baeder, 2006). TWC is a research-based

educational program designed for lower literacy populations and addresses core relationship skills for adults and can be used with both married and nonmarried individuals and couples.

Measures

Children's Social Skills (CSS) (Dodge & Somberg, 1987): 4 items on a 5-point scale; higher scores indicate higher level of children's general skills in social situations. Cronbach's alpha=.80.

Positive Parenting (PP): 3 items on a 4-point scale; "Rarely" (1) to "Daily;" higher scores indicate higher frequency of use of positive parenting strategies. Cronbach's alpha=.60

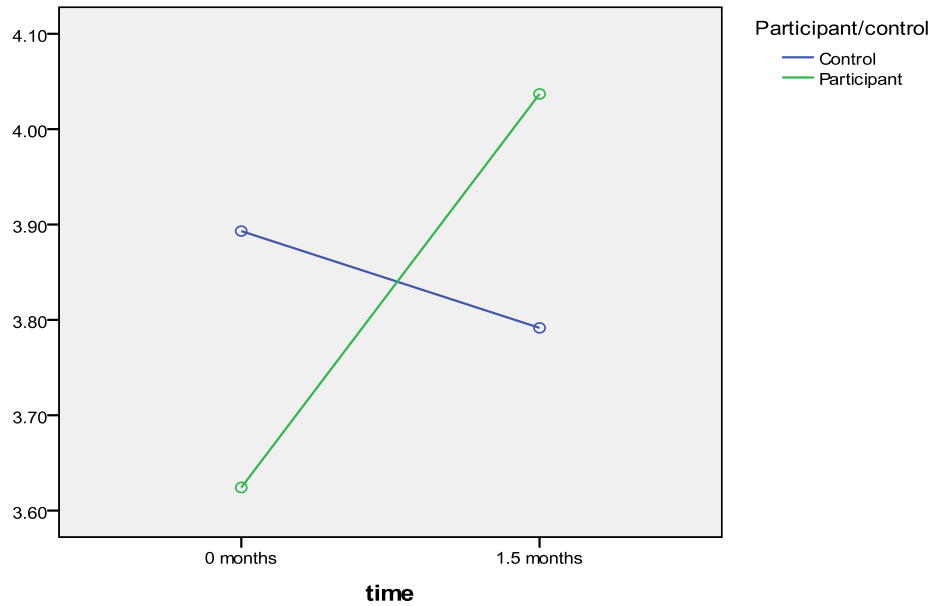
Coparenting Quality (CPQ) (adapted from Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987): 8 items on a 5-point scale; "Never" (1) to "Always" 5; higher scores indicate a higher level of cooperation in the coparenting relationship. Cronbach's alpha=.76.

Test-group: Categorical variable—1 indicating participants and 0 indicating controls.

Results

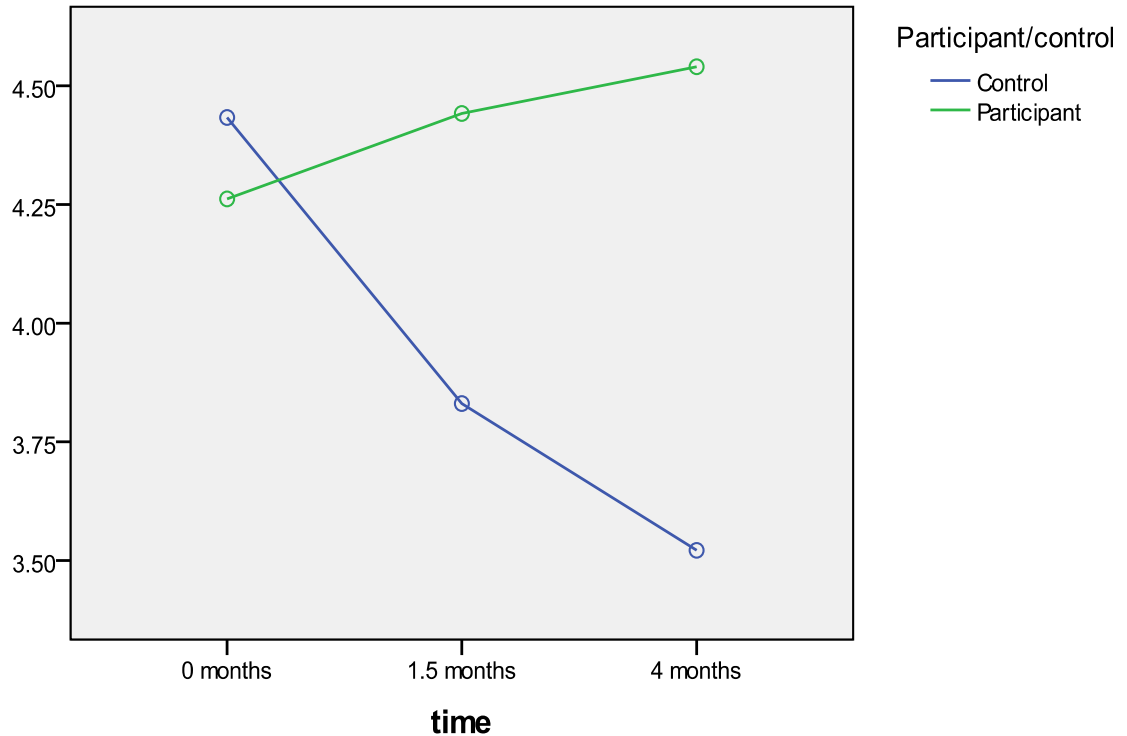
A repeated measures analysis of variance (RMANCOVA) was conducted to assess the change across time in CPQ from pre- to post-test while controlling for dependency (i.e., couples' data). The time X group interaction was marginally significant ($p = .067$). It appeared that participants' reported coparenting quality average score was lower than the controls at the initial assessment; however, at post-test, participants reported higher levels of coparenting quality in comparison to controls (Figure 1). To date, sustained effect of group has not been demonstrated.

Figure 1. *CPQ from pre-test to post-test*



An additional RMANCOVA was conducted to assess the change across time in children's social skills while controlling for dependency and positive parenting (PP) (controls reported higher PP scores at pre-test) for the first 3 waves of data collection. There was no main effect for time; however, there was a significant time X group interaction [$F(1, 11.89) = 1, p = .001$]. Participants reported increased CSS scores from pre-test to the 4-month follow-up; and concomitantly, control parents reported decreased CSS scores over time—while controlling for all else in the model (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *CSS from pre-test to 4 months follow-up*



For analyses of change in CSS across the 4 time-points, we utilized growth curve analyses. The unconditional growth model (Model A) revealed that the population average for children's social skills was 4.27 at pretest and increased by .017. The null hypothesis for both the slope and initial status ($p < .05$ & $p < .001$, respectively) were rejected, indicating significant change across time in CSS for the full sample. However, when test group was entered in the model and dependency controlled, the slope parameter was nonsignificant and a marginally significant differential between participants and controls in their change across time was shown ($\beta = .079$, $p = .10$) (Model B). While the main effect in Model B indicates that children's social skills for the group decreased an average of .027 at each assessment, the time X group interaction effect indicates that participants' CSS scores improved at each assessment an average of .052 (See Figure 3 and Table 1). Both participants' and controls' CSS scores at time 1 were relatively the same. However, the average participant's CSS score increases to 4.9 at 12-month follow-up, while the average control's CSS score decreased to 3.9 over the same time period.

Figure 3. Prototypical plot of the CSS over time by group.

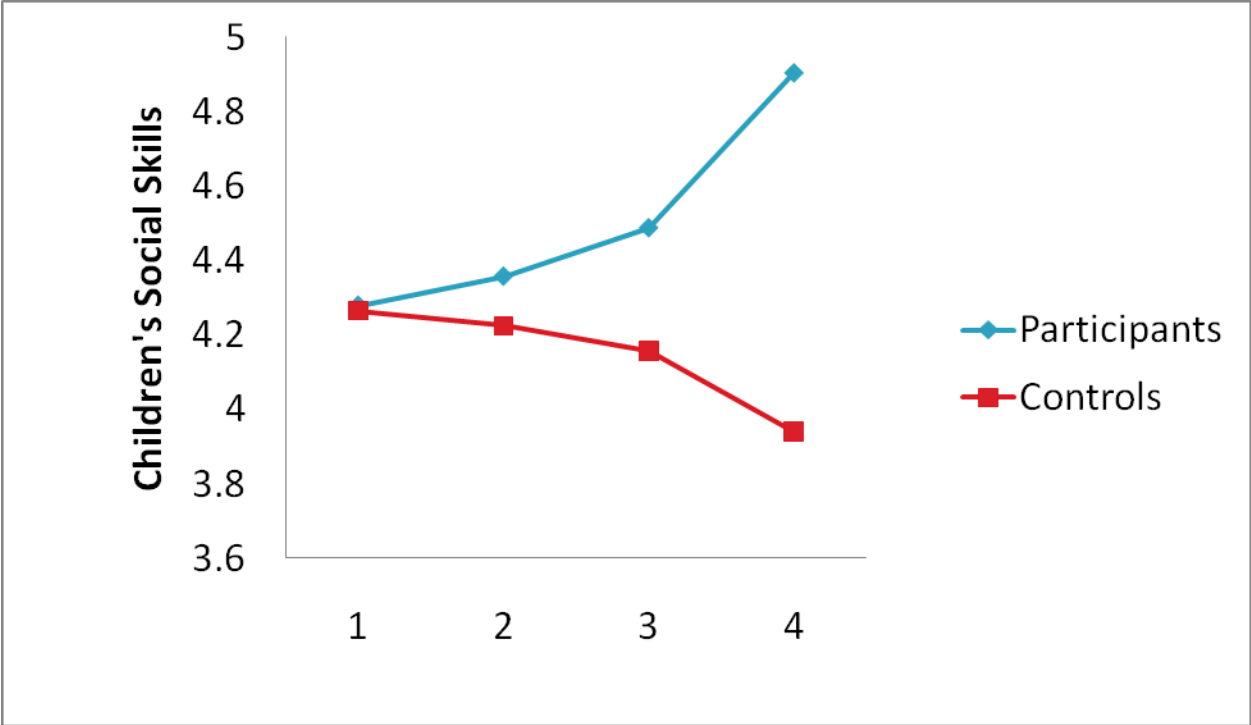


Table 1. *Taxonomy of Fitted Nested Models*

Fixed Effects	Par.	Mod. A	Mod. B
Initial Status (π_{0i})	γ_{00}	4.27***	4.20***
Dependency	γ_{01}		.12
Test Group (P/C)	γ_{02}		.014
Positive Parenting (PP)	γ_{03}		
Rate of Change (π_{1i})			
ageC	γ_{10}	.017*	-.027
ageC* P/C	γ_{11}		~.079
Goodness of Fit			
Deviance (-2LL)		380.3	206.0
Degrees of Freedom		2	2
ΔD		--	174.3

Summary

Extremely limited evidence exists on whether relationship education can positively affect young children. Those that have examined this question have not included minority and low-income parents. Findings from the current study suggest that RME participation enhances low-income African American parents' coparenting quality from pre-program to post-program and their preschool children's social skills growth trajectory (i.e., one indicator of child well-being) from pre-program to 12 months following their parent(s)' program participation.

This early evidence of the positive "spillover" of program impact is promising. Increasing the sample size with the current year's participants and control parents may further strengthen the trends observed to date. Plans are to further validate the findings of the current study, by examining teacher and observer reports of children's social competence across the 4 time points also gathered for this study.

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