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Citation	**Research On Social Work Practice, 2002, v. 12 n. 4, p. 546-557**
Issued Date	**2002**
URL	**http://hdl.handle.net/10722/82344**
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An Evaluative Study on the Effectiveness

of a Parent-Child Parallel Group Model

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Abstract

<u>Objective:</u> To examine the effectiveness of a parent-child parallel group model that attempted to reduce parent-adolescent conflict. <u>Method:</u> A single group research design with pretest, posttest, and follow-up assessment was employed. <u>Results:</u> Results showed that the level of mother-adolescent conflict at posttest was lower than the level at pretest. The findings, based on the target problem rating, indicated that after the group intervention, both the mothers and adolescents perceived that the problems they had identified in the mother-child relationship had become less severe. The findings, based on subjective outcome measures, were also positive. <u>Conclusion:</u> The present study provides some evidence to support the effectiveness of the parallel group intervention for social work practice.

Evaluative study on the effectiveness of a

parent-child parallel group model

Research findings show that parent-adolescent conflict is concurrently related to

psychological well-being, school adjustment, and problem behavior (Shek, 1997, 1999). The

transition from primary to secondary school can be especially difficult for adolescents because

there are major changes in the learning environment and curriculum, living and leisure patterns,

and relationships with friends. The search for security needs (Caffery & Erdman, 2000) and

individual autonomy (Fuligni, 1998) are always in conflict with parental authority. Chinese

parents place great emphasis on filial piety, which is the guiding principle of socialization

practices in Chinese families (Ho, 1986). Chinese adolescents are then expected to comply with

their parents' authority unconditionally. Negotiation and confrontation initiated by adolescents

are regarded as disrespectful and hostile. Parents' excessive use of authority may escalate

conflict to a dysfunctional level (Rueter & Conger, 1995). To enhance the conflict resolution of

both parents and adolescents, and thus bring about changes on either side, the parallel group

model of parenting was adopted in this study.

The parallel group model refers to the practice whereby two groups of people engage in

the same type of activities simultaneously, but separately in different rooms with planned

inter-group exchange. The program objectives and contents of the two groups are the same. The

model is valued by practitioners and researchers for its ability to deal with specific problems of

parent-child communication. For example, children's and parents' grieving over the loss of

family members (Zambelli, Clark, & Hodgson, 1994), abusive parents and abused children

(Damon & Waterman, 1987; Griggs & Boldi, 1995), young cancer sufferers and their parents

(Stuber, Gonzalez, Benjamin, & Golant, 1995), parents and children in step-families (Mandell &

Birenzweig, 1990), abused women and their children (Peled & Davis, 1995), and sexually

abused children and their parents (Mandell & Damon, 1989). Research on the effectiveness of

the parallel group approach has suggested that it could be employed to improve parent-child

relationships and enhance communication skills (Frankel, 1992; Wantz & Recor, 1984). From

our experience in Hong Kong, the use of the parallel group model could help to set up realistic

and mutually agreed upon goals for parents and children (Chan & Cheung, 1998). It could also

prevent the labeling effect and the individualizing of children's problems. Instead, problems

could be defined according to the perspectives and opinions of both parents and adolescents. The

parallel group approach could thus encourage both parties to be responsible for solving their

problems.

Method

Participants

The recruitment process was conducted by the group workers, but the group process was

videotaped for a documentary series of parenting TV programs. The participants were openly

recruited and selected according to the following criteria:

1) The candidates were experiencing parent-adolescent conflict.

2)   The adolescents were between the ages of 11 and 13 and were going to start secondary

school in the coming school year.

3)   The candidates had given their consent for the group meetings to be broadcast.

4)   The candidates were able to participate in and were committed to participating in all the

group meetings.

Research Design

A single group pretest, posttest, follow-up research design (O-X-O-O) was employed in this study. As is common with intervention research, this study met with difficulties when forming control groups. A randomized design involving a no-treatment control group was ruled out on ethical grounds. Instead, measurements of the participants' evaluation of the parent-child relationship were conducted at the following three timeperiods: within 1 month before the group treatment (pregroup measurement), within 1 month after the group treatment (postgroup measurement), and 18 months after the group treatment (follow-up measurement).

Quantitative analysis was based on reported data that were collected by using the Chinese version of the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ), and the Target Problem Rating (TPR) scales completed by the parents and children separately during the pregroup and postgroup measurements. In the follow-up measurement, only the CBQ was administrated. Because the sample size was small, a nonparametric Friedman test was used to explore the differences among the CBQ scores obtained from the pregroup, postgroup, and follow-up measurements. Wilcoxon's test was employed to explore the differences among the scores. At the end of the parallel group sessions, all the participants completed the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) so that their feedback concerning the group intervention could be collected.

Instrumentation

*The Chinese version of the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire.*The CBQ was developed by Prinz,

Foster, Kent, and O'Leary (1979). Its Chinese version had previously been employed in a local

research study (Yeung, 1998). There were different versions of the questionnaire: one for parents

and two for adolescents. The mothers' CBQ collected the rating on the severity of

mother-adolescent conflict. The adolescents' CBQ assessed mother-adolescent conflict as well as

the father-adolescent conflict. There were 20 items measuring the severity of parent-child

conflict. The higher the CBQ score, the higher the severity of conflict between the parent and

adolescent. The internal consistency of the CBQ, assessed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients,

was found to be .90 and above for both parents and adolescents (Prinz et al., 1979). The

reliability of the Chinese version of the CBQ, for both the parents' and adolescents' versions,

was satisfactory. For the clients in the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was in the range of

0.7 to 0.9.

*The Target Problem Rating.*The purpose of this measure was to assess the perceived severity of

the problems identified by the participants. In the pre-group interview, each participant was

asked to state parent-child problems that he or she had found distressing. They rated each

problem on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 0 (the least serious) to 7 (extremely serious). In the

postgroup interview, participants rated the same problems again for comparison.

The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire.

Participants were asked to complete the CSQ, which solicited comments on the group

sessions' content, format, and effectiveness.

Data Collection Procedure

During the pregroup and postgroup interviews, the CBQ and the TPR were self-administered by the participants. After 18 months, the follow-up assessment was conducted. The CBQs were sent to the participants bymail. The participants then sent the completed questionnaires back. With telephone calls placed as brief reminders, the return rate was 100%.

Special Features of the Parallel Group Intervention

The parallel group model adopted in this study shared the characteristics of the assessment-based group design. Based on the findings of the pre-group assessments, the content of the parallel groups was then tailor-made for the participants.

Two parallel groups were organized for the adolescents and their parents. They met simultaneously in different rooms once a week for two hours. Each group met for eight sessions. The content of the parallel groups focused on communication-skills training and attitude adjustment. The parent group aimed at strengthening the listening ability of the parents and getting them to use shorter phrases to express their opinions so as to encourage the adolescents to express themselves more. The intervention also aimed at helping the parents change their attitude towards and perception of the adolescents, and learn the skills of anger management. For the adolescent group, the emphasis was on the skills of non-offensive expression of needs. The adolescents were encouraged to maintain a good temper and not give up their attempts to communicate with their parents.

The design of the parallel groups had three main features: an emphasis on partnership, complementary training, and inter-group exchange. The sense of partnership was promoted by

the joint participation that could reveal mutual commitment and responsibility for resolving

conflict and enhancing the quality of the relationship. The parents' participation in the group

process played a significant role in helping their children to learn social skills (Barlow & Seidner,

1983; Budd, 1985; Richmond, Gaines, & Fogt, 1981). The parents could become the trainers in

the group sessions. As the parents had full understanding of the design and rationale of group

activities, they helped to encourage their children during the learning process and to assist them

in completing homework assignments. In addition, the parents' keen participation let their

children feel that their parents were working hard to improve communication. The sense of

togetherness when facing problems and the sharing of views encouraged parent-child

collaboration towards resolving conflict and enhancing the relationship.

The conflict resolution training for parents and that for adolescents complemented each

other. In the group sessions, the adolescents were trained in the skills of non-offensive

expression of concerns. They learned to adopt the attitude of "keeping a good temper and never

giving up" and to use non-provocative expressions, such as "I do not mean to offend you but I

want to express my concerns," to draw the parents' attention to their message. In the same

sessions, the parents learned to listen empathically and to dispute irrational beliefs such as "s/he

does not respect me," "I know what s/he wants even if s/he does not say what it is," or "s/he

would be very troublesome if I did not control her/him." Such beliefs could normally block

communication. The parents were also trained in the skills of inviting others to talk, expressing

understanding, and expressing concern without the excessive use of authority. The homework

assignments were designed to help the adolescents to express their concerns and the parents to

listen to their children. Under the structured design, participants learned to evaluate and improve

their communication through constructive feedback. They became aware of their commonalities and differences regarding problem definition and the identification of needs and concerns. At a later stage, they learned and practiced the same model of conflict resolution, which included the following eight steps: (1) choosing an appropriate time and place for communication; (2) selecting only one issue for discussion at a time; (3) listening to other's concerns; (4) expressing one's own concerns; (5) identifying common concerns; (6) listing as many solutions as possible; (7) identifying solutions that can satisfy both parties; and (8) implementing these solutions and evaluating their effectiveness. The learning process was effective because both parties were using the same model.

The inter-group exchange was arranged to help the parents and the adolescents understand more about each other's needs and feelings. At the mid-stage of the group sessions, an inter-group exchange activity was arranged in which the participants would meet in parent-adolescent pairs, but the members of each pair were not related to each other. They could discuss problems they faced in their roles as parents or children. Since they were not talking to their own children or parents, they could express themselves more calmly and listen to the other party objectively. Through these exchanges, the parents could hear the concerns of the adolescents without focusing on the specific problems of their own children. Likewise, the adolescents could get a taste of the perspective of their parents without getting caught up in their situations at home. There was another inter-group exchange after the participants had learnt the conflict resolution model. Using the same arrangement as that of the first inter-group exchange activity, the parents and the adolescents were paired up to practice conflict management skills. Again, the parents and children were not paired up with their own family members. This gave

everyone a chance to practice the new skills in a less emotionally fraught environment.

Results

    There were 11 mothers and 11 adolescents recruited for the parallel groups. The age of the mothers ranged from 35 to 46; the age of the adolescents from 11 to 13. Only one of the 11 families was a single-parent family. Most of the mothers were housewives, though four of them were working full-time or part-time. All the adolescents had completed primary school and were going to start secondary school in the coming school year. The mothers' educational backgrounds varied from having no formal education to having completed the fifth year of secondary school.

The Conflict Behavior Questionnaire

    The total CBQ scores conveyed evidence to indicate that parent-child conflict had been reduced. Sixty-four percent of the adolescents reported less mother-child conflict in the post-group and follow-up assessments. Thirty-six percent and fifty-five percent of them reported less father-child conflict in the post-group and follow-up assessments respectively. Seventy-three percent and eighty-two percent of the mothers reported less mother-child conflict in the post-group and follow-up assessments respectively.

    The results of the Friedman test were that a significant difference was found among the mothers' reports on mother-child conflict between different points of assessment, while there was no significant difference with respect to the adolescents' reports on parent-child conflict (See Table 1). From the mothers' responses to the CBQ, it could be seen that mother-child

conflict dropped from a mean of 12.64 for the pre-group measurement to a mean of 8.36 for the post-group measurement. Although this score increased to 9.09 in the follow-up measurement, it was still lower than the score obtained in the pre-group measurement. This showed that the group intervention had effectively reduced parent-child conflict, as perceived by the mothers, by a significant degree.

The Target Problem Rating

The target problems identified by the mothers were mostly related to conflict with their children over such things as the children's tendency to argue with their parents, as well as their bad temper, lack of respect towards their parents, lack of discipline, reluctance to study, fussiness about food, and tendency not to express their feelings. The target problems identified by the children were also mostly related to communication and conflict with their mothers. Examples included quarreling, their mothers' not being able to understand them, and their parents' scolding them, being bad tempered, and being overly critical. The rating of each target problem was analyzed. A lower rating meant that the relationship had improved.

Table 2 shows that the mothers identified more problems (33 in total) and believed that the problems were more serious (scoring 4.88 on average). The adolescents identified fewer problems (21 in total) and rated them relatively less serious (scoring 2.95 on average). The result of the Wilcoxon test was that a significant difference was found in the TPR scores between the pre-group and post-group measurements. This showed that the clients' perceptions of the severity of the parent-child problems had been reduced after the parallel groups.

<u>The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire</u>

Table 3 shows the results of the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire. Over 80% of the adolescents gave positive comments regarding the group content. All of the adolescents had positive things to say regarding the group counselors. Over 80% of the adolescents said the group was helpful. They reported that they had improved in their ability to express themselves, to understand their parents' needs and feelings, and to respond positively to their parents' criticisms. More than 70% of the adolescents reported that they had improved in their ability to manage conflict with their parents.

All the mothers were satisfied with both the group content and the group counselors. They reported that the skills they learned were practical. About 90% of them pointed out that the group helped them to change the irrational beliefs they had towards their children, to understand their children's needs, to spend more time listening to their children, and to express their views calmly and precisely. They found that the group helped with conflict resolution and thus enhanced the parent-child relationship.

Discussion and applications to social work practice

According to the reports of the mothers, mother-child conflict was reduced after the parallel groups and this reduction could still be observed after one and a half years. Why was there such a change? One possible answer is that it was due to the effects of the program. During the group period, the mothers and adolescents jointly attended the group activities. This would have created more opportunities for parent-child communication, which might have been helpful to enhance their relationships. Of course, such changes could not be solely attributed to the

intervention of the parallel group model, as there was no control group for comparison.

While the present findings showed that the changes in parent-child conflict were not obvious to the adolescents, more than half (64%) of the adolescents reported less mother-child conflict in the post-group and follow-up assessments, while 55% of them reported less father-child conflict in the follow-up assessment. The findings suggested that the parallel groups had earned positive feedback from the participants. The findings of the TPR and the mothers' reports on the CBQ provide tentative evidence to support the effectiveness of the parallel group model. For further development of the model, a more vigorous research design of the effectiveness of the model should be considered.

Despite the limitations of the research design, the experience of running the parallel group has several implications for social work practice. First, this model can be used to improve parent-adolescent relationships. The design and the content of the parallel group model are based on the results of the needs assessment. With the aid of the program manual(Yeung et al., 1999), the model can be applied widely to different parenting programs. Social workers can revise the program content and format according to the participants' specific problems and concerns. It is possible to address the specific parenting problems of battered women and their children, of divorced parents and their children, and of abusive parents and their abused children.

Second, the present project further reinforces our belief that it is essential to arrange joint activities for the two groups. Because of time constraints, there were only two sessions of joint group practice. If 10 sessions had been scheduled, an extra joint group practice session could have been added to include inter-group exchange between parents and their own child, which would definitely have led to even better results. Regarding the research design, an experimental

or quasi-experimental design including control groups is needed in future research to better demonstrate the effectiveness of the group model. Though the research design of the present study might not be very empirical, it could serve as an effective vehicle for needs assessment and group evaluation.

The parallel group model has received more attention in Hong Kong recently because social work practitioners increasingly apply it in parenting training. It is hoped that this report on our experience with the model and our research findings will serve as a valuable reference for social work practitioners.

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Table 1

Results of the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire

	Mean	S.D.	N	Mean Rank	χ^2	Asymp. Sig.
Mothers' reports on mother-adolescent conflict						
Pre-group assessment	12.64	4.90		2.59		
Post-group assessment	8.36	6.31	11	1.64	6.45	.040
Follow-up assessment	9.09	5.26		1.77		
Adolescents' reports on mother-adolescent conflict						
Pre-group assessment	5.91	5.17		2.41		
Post-group assessment	4.45	3.80	11	1.82	3.211	.201
Follow-up assessment	5.36	4.11		1.77		
Adolescents' reports on father-adolescent conflict						
Pre-group assessment	5.45	4.72		2.15		
Post-group assessment	5.73	5.87	10	2.20	2.056	.358
Follow-up assessment	5.00	5.60		1.65		

Table 2
Results of the Target Problem Rating

	Mean	Median	Range	S.D.	N*	Mean Rank	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Mothers' reports on the Target Problem Rating							
Pre-group assessment	4.88	5.00	6.00	1.47	33	14.42	
Post-group assessment	2.86	3.00	7.00	1.63	33	3.00	.000
Adolescents' reports on the Target Problem Rating							
Pre-group assessment	2.95	3.00	6.00	1.69	21	8.65	
Post-group assessment	1.91	2.00	5.00	1.57	21	7.83	.020

*N is the total number of identified problems

Table 3

Results of the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ)

Items			Ratings		
Adolescents' reports on CSQ (N=11)					
	Very helpful	Helpful	Average	Unhelpful	Very unhelpful
Group content	18%	64%	18%	0%	0%
Group counselor	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%
Skills of expression	18%	64%	18%	0%	0%
Expressing personal views calmly	36%	55%	9%	0%	0%
Understanding parents' needs and feelings	27%	55%	18%	0%	0%
Responding to parents' criticism positively	9%	82%	9%	0%	0%
Conflict resolution	18%	55%	27%	0%	0%
Mothers' reports on CSQ (N=11)					
Group content	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%
Group counselor	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Changing irrational beliefs	73%	18%	9%	0%	0%
Understanding children's needs	27%	73%	0%	0%	0%
More listening	82%	0%	18%	0%	0%
Talking more slowly and gently	91%	0%	9%	0%	0%
Expressing personal views calmly	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Conflict resolution	36%	55%	9%	0%	0%
Enhancing parent-child relationship	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%