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Relationship-Strengthening Class Improves Life for New Families

Expectant parents who completed a brief relationship-strengthening class around the time their child was born showed lasting effects on each family member's well being and on the family's overall relationships, according to a recent Penn State study.

The team, led by Mark Feinberg, Senior Research Associate in Penn State's Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development, analyzed the effects of the Family Foundations program for three years after a child was born.

The Family Foundations program, offered in several Pennsylvania locations as part of the study, targets couples expecting their first child. Most research has shown that conflict increases while affection and support decrease among couples after a baby is born. The program's eight sessions -- four before birth and four after -- aim to foster attitudes and skills related to positive family relationships, such as emotion regulation, temperament and positive parenting. The program is effective, says Feinberg, in part because expectant, first-time parents tend to be open-minded.

"At this point in their lives, parents are eager and excited, and looking for more information about parenting," said Feinberg. "Because they quickly become experts on their child after he or she is born, this time before and just after birth is crucial. Parents are open and hungry to learn at this stage, and this allows us to give guidance to help improve their confidence and help them know what to expect."

Parents, who were randomly assigned to enroll in the program reported lower levels of stress and depression symptoms and higher levels of confidence in their parenting abilities, compared to parents who were randomly assigned to a control group. Also, parents in the program supported each other more than parents not enrolled in the program. Enrolled parents showed more effective parenting styles -- they overreacted less and were less likely to spank, slap, grab or hit their children as discipline or punishment.

Feinberg said that helping parents support each other is a key aim of the program.

"When we feel supported, we feel tend to feel more confident and less distressed -- we have a longer fuse, rather than a shorter fuse," he said. "All this can lead to parents getting emotionally closer and more supportive of each other and their children."

Children of parents enrolled in Family Foundations showed higher levels of emotional adjustment compared to children of parents not enrolled in the program, as reported by mothers. At age three, boys of parents in the study showed lower levels of aggression and hyperactivity, but this finding did not apply to girls.

The attitudes parents gain, and the support they learn to provide to each other, create a protective layer that helps them weather the storm of stress that can erupt with the birth of a child.

"By giving expecting parents the tools, skills and perspectives to support each other, the program results in enhanced co-parenting relations that help protect them from stressors," said Feinberg. "Sleep-deprived new parents can feel distressed and irritated easily. But with positive co-parenting relations, disagreements tend not to escalate into conflict, and conflict tends not to blow up into violence."

Unlike some prevention programs, Family Foundations was designed for all parents, not only for those identified as "at risk." According to Feinberg, research suggests that not only married parents can benefit from such a program, but divorced parents who still seek to raise a child together can benefit from learning these skills and perspectives, too.

"Parents should not underestimate the importance of the types of support they provide for one another for their child's welfare," said Feinberg. "The fact is that children's well-being is dependent on parents' interactions."

Results from Feinberg's study were published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*. Co-authors include Damon E. Jones, Prevention Research Center, Penn State; Marni L. Kan, RTI International; and Megan Goslin, Yale Child Study Center.

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