RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Benefits of Engaging Head Start Parents in Emotion Socialization Practices

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Developing social-emotional skills can improve children's happiness, experiences, and ability to establish positive relationships. Children from low-income families experience higher risk factors than their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Hence, fostering these skills early at home and in the classroom is essential. Past research demonstrates various interventions to reduce problem behaviors and improve emotional socialization in children, as well as the impact of educating parents on effective emotion socialization practices. Tuning in to Kids Online (TIKOL) is an emotion socialization parenting program aiming to support parents' understanding of children's social-emotional development and employ an emotion coaching style to help children understand, label, and regulate their emotions. This study examined the engagement, effectiveness, and acceptability of TIKOL in a small sample of Head Start parents. Findings support using TIKOL to improve parents' emotion coaching practices, reduce parents' distressing reactions to children's behavior, and reduce parent-reported child conduct problems.

Keywords: parenting, early childhood, social-emotional development

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Fostering positive social-emotional health in young children has long-term implications on children's general development and learning. Specifically, a lack of social skills can lead to long-term difficulties building strong relationships with peers, adults, and teachers, which may cause children to struggle academically (Denham et al., 2015; Kılıç, 2015). Prosocial behaviors foster experiences of affirmative acceptance from peers, leading to higher-quality relationships. Systemic barriers related to economic disadvantage and familial stress can increase problem behaviors across their lifespan (Ramanathan et al., 2017). The relationships children develop contribute significantly to their interactions with others (Sheridan et al., 2019). Developing emotional competence early on can serve as a protective factor (i.e., characteristics that buffer against adverse life outcomes) and reduce the incidence of future problem behaviors, especially within low-income preschool settings like Head Start (Denham et al., 2015; Kılıç, 2015).

Preschool-aged children experience a wide range of emotions that they are not always well-equipped to manage without direct instruction from an adult. Studies show that approximately 1 in 4 preschool-aged children experience social-emotional difficulties (Brown et al., 2012; Lavigne et al., 1996). Various parenting programs recognize the importance of positive parent-child relationships and have investigated the effects of strengthening those relationships and building emotional competence in young children (Duch et al., 2019; Leijten et al., 2017; Xiao et al., 2018). Emotion coaching is one emerging concept developed to teach children how to acknowledge, understand, and manage their emotions (Gottman et al., 1996). Research in the past twenty years has begun to focus on the positive effects of emotion coaching on young children's emotional development with great success (Loop & Roskam, 2016; Wu et al., 2019).

Emotion coaching refers to a parenting philosophy and style of helping parents tune in to children's emotions, recognize expression of emotions as a time for teaching, validate children's feelings, guide the child to label the emotion, and help the child problem-solve in addressing their emotions (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997). The Tuning in to Kids (TIK) parenting program is an emotion socialization program grounded in emotion coaching developed to help parents (Havighurst & Harley, 2007)**.** The program is typically provided in six two-hour sessions with groups of eight to 10 parents. Research shows that parents who participated in TIK reported an increase in using emotion coaching strategies (e.g., Bjørk et al., 2022; Havighurst et al., 2019)**,** reductions in children's anxiety (Edrissi et al., 2019), and conduct behaviors (e.g., (Aghaie Meybodi et al., 2019), and improvements in children's emotional knowledge and competence (Havighurst et al., 2009). Though these findings are promising, no evaluations of TIK have been evaluated in the United States.

This study focused on the online, self-guided adaptation of TIK called Tuning in to Kids Online (TIKOL; Havighurst & Harley, 2021). TIKOL condenses the information provided in the group sessions into 10 video modules covering topics such as emotion coaching, pausing before responding to children's negative emotions, and reacting to children's fears and anger. This self-guided adaptation allows parents and caregivers to learn about the topics at their own pace. Research highlights barriers for families to access evidence-based interventions, including conflicting work schedules, life stressors, and transportation barriers (Breitenstein et al., 2014). Ensuring families' well-being through access to evidence-based interventions is essential in education and proved especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and restrictions (Cook et al., 2021).

CURRENT STUDY

This study examined an online and self-paced parenting program, Tuning in to Kids Online (TIKOL), within a sample of Head Start parents. This online program was adapted from Tuning in to Kids (TIK; Havighurst & Harley, 2007)**,** a group-based parenting program developed to help parents support their children's emotions. TIKOL is a 10-video program that covers topics such as emotion coaching, displaying empathy, and managing various emotions and situations (e.g., anger, sadness, sibling conflict).

Participants in the sample were predominantly White (88%), had completed some college (38%) or a postsecondary degree (62%), and were primarily working full-time (62%). This sample reflects a higher representation of educated parents and those who could have limited daily availability than the national Head Start population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). Parents were granted access to the TIKOL content and guided to watch approximately one video per week. Each week, parents completed questions related to their engagement with video modules and opportunities to practice the skills from the videos. Surveys were administered to examine changes in parents' self-reported beliefs in emotion coaching and dismissing, parenting practices around children's negative emotions, and parent perceptions of their children's social-emotional behaviors.

KEY FINDINGS

There are three main findings from this study that provide support for TIKOL's effectiveness, fidelity, and acceptability. First, parents' exposure to an emotion socialization curriculum improved parents' beliefs in using emotion coaching to engage with their children's emotions. Parents reported fewer distressed reactions and increased expressive encouragement. These changes were also associated with improvements in children's conduct behavior problems. A second main finding is that parents could complete TIKOL as intended. Specifically, parents reported being "quite engaged" with the content and watched an estimated 97% of the weekly videos. The third and final finding is that parents in this study reported TIKOL as a highly acceptable intervention. These findings suggest that this online, self-paced parenting program may help reduce barriers to accessing an evidence-based program that can effectively change behaviors targeted in caregivers and their children.

TIKOL can enhance how parents engage in their child's social-emotional development. Its' focus on emotion socialization practices sets the stage for collaborating effectively with their child's early childhood educator to promote children's emotional regulation and social skills across home and school settings. Our study findings highlighted how vital emotion socialization parenting programs could be for parents' and children's well-being. There are also several implications from our study findings and other supporting literature on the impact of emotion socialization practices on early childhood educators and program administrators.

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

For those early childhood educators unfamiliar with the TIKOL program or emotion socialization practices, there is much to be learned. The five steps of emotion coaching include (1) being aware of the range of children's emotions, (2) recognizing children's emotional expression as an opportunity for teaching, (3) empathizing and validating child's feelings, (4) helping children label their emotions, and (5) helping children problem-solve and manage their emotions (Gottman et al., 1997). TIKOL emphasizes the importance of how adults react to children's strong emotions. Reacting positively or negatively to children's emotions can significantly impact these teachable moments and ultimately caregiver-child relationships. Positive adult-child relationships can foster healthy social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment.

Knowing that educators' emotion socialization is similar to how parents socialize their children to emotions (Denham et al., 2017) supports the importance of employing emotion coaching as a prevention practice in classrooms to promote healthy development in all children. When adults in schools have an awareness and shared understanding of addressing children's emotions, it can help improve emotion regulation skills in both students and teachers (Gus et al., 2015). Educators in touch with their own emotional reactions (and how those have been developed from one's own history) within the classroom are more likely to engage in emotion coaching practices and less likely to dismiss children's emotions (Ornaghi et al., 2022). Helping parents to be in tune with their own emotions is believed to be the single most proximal factor to address when working to improve children's emotion socialization (Hajal & Paley, 2020).

Implications for Program Administrators

Program administrators are charged with providing their staff with the training and resources necessary to foster positive social-emotional development in young children. They too can promote positive learning environments for children and help to facilitate strong family connections. Working closely with caregivers in the home helps to ensure consistency in emotion socialization practices that promote children's healthy expression of emotions. Finally, creating a work culture that emphasizes caregiver well-being and resilience can have a profound impact on increasing educators' emotional capacity for the hard work associated with teaching young children (Zinsser et al., 2014). Research suggests that educators with lower job-related stress are more likely to endorse positive emotion socialization practices (Denham et al., 2017).

Program administrators can also commit themselves to ensure the latest evidence-based teaching practices are employed within their settings. National and local initiatives, such as the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, can be accessed to obtain classroom curricula, new developments in best practices in classroom management, and the latest in evidence-based parenting practices and programs. Online parenting programs, such as TIKOL, have the unique opportunity to reach families who ordinarily wouldn't be able to access those supports. Program administrators' awareness of program accessibility, effectiveness, and acceptability are all essential considerations when working with caregivers who are invested in children's social-emotional development. Often, early childhood education centers don't have the resources or personnel to deliver group-based interventions to parents and caregivers, which can diminish the impact of evidence-based services (Axford et al., 2012). However, research indicates that sharing information with parents via web-based media is just as effective as in-person resources (Nieuwboer et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2020). Providing accessible ways to connect to this information can improve relationships between centers, parents, and children.

SUMMARY

Given the importance of fostering social-emotional development for young children, the results of this study cannot be understated. Early childhood programs have a unique opportunity to engage parents and educators in positive emotion socialization practices across home and school

settings. Head Start's dedication to viewing parents as collaborators in children's education provides an opportunity to create unique professional development opportunities on the topic of emotional socialization that can be accessible to all caregivers.

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