
RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE-SUMMARY

Family Map Inventory and *TIPS for Great Kids!*: Tools for Increasing Parent-Teacher Communication

Patti A. Bokony, Leanne Whiteside-Mansell, and Taren Swindle
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

Family engagement during early childhood increases young children's school readiness and later school success. Parent-teacher communication is a key component in increasing family engagement. We tested the impact of a two-pronged intervention, the *Family Map Inventory for Early Childhood* (Family Map; family assessment) and *Teaching Important Parenting Skills* (TIPS; parenting education program), on parent-teacher communication in private childcare centers serving low-income families. The intervention included a four-hour Family Map training and a six-hour TIPS training. Trained teachers conducted Family Map interviews and implemented TIPS for four months. Results indicated: (1) teachers were willing to implement the Family Map and TIPS intervention in private child care settings; and (2) the parents and teachers in the intervention group reported higher levels of parent-teacher communication than those in the comparison group.

Keywords: parent education; family engagement; early education; parent-teacher communication; parent-teacher relationship

Children do best when child care providers have meaningful and positive relationships with families (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008). For this reason, major early childhood professional organizations' standards for quality child care address family engagement and positive parent-provider relationships (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families Head Start Bureau,

Patti A. Bokony, Department of Psychiatry, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences; Leanne Whiteside-Mansell, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences; and Taren Swindle, Department of Family & Preventive Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences;

Patti Bokony is now at the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Patti A. Bokony, Department of Family & Preventive Medicine, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences,

4301 W. Markham Street, Slot 723, Little Rock, AR 72205.

Email: bokonypattia@uams.edu

2006; National Association for Family Child Care, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2007). However, the idea that child care providers should take the lead in engaging families and building partnerships with parents is relatively new (Duran, Foster, & National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group, 2010). Professional development and tools area needed to build productive partnerships that join parents and teachers together to improve children's outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006).

Effective parent-teacher partnerships are reciprocal, on-going, and balanced (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Parent-teacher communication is a key component of parent-teacher partnerships. Effective communication flows in both directions. Teachers recognize families have unique knowledge of their children. Parents recognize teachers have access to resources less available to them. Parent-teacher communication is challenging, yet critical, to building positive relationships and supportive connections between home and child care (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); yet, we have little evidence that parents and teachers actually have meaningful conversations (McGrath, 2007).

During preschool, most communication between parents and teachers occurs during drop-off and pick-up times and is usually brief, polite 'small talk' (Shpancer, 2002). Parents report they most often talk with teachers about child behavior problems and with administrators about problems that may or may not be child related (Bridgemohan, van Wyk, & van Staden, 2005). Typically teachers avoid discussing controversial child-rearing practices with parents (Fagan, 1994), are unlikely to offer parenting help, encouragement or information (Shpancer, 2002), and rate parents' competence negatively (Galinsky, 1990; McGrath, 2007; Phillips, 1991). Parents typically do not share family information with childcare workers (Shpancer, 2002) nor do they view childcare workers as a resource for child development or childrearing information (Kontos & Dunn, 1989). Teachers in private child care centers report talking with parents less frequently compared to those in centers receiving state or federal funds (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994). Training and tools are needed to help child care providers address these challenges to family engagement.

This study evaluated a two-pronged intervention designed to prepare child care workers to conduct family assessments, share parenting information and refer families for resources. The intervention consisted of a (1) family assessment tool, the *Family Map Inventory for Early Childhood* (Family Map; Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, Conners, & Bokony, 2007) and (2) parenting program *Teaching Important Parenting Skills: TIPS for Great Kids!* (TIPS; Bokony, Butler, & Shaw-Bailey, 2011). We examined whether child care providers would utilize the Family Map and TIPS intervention (i.e., feasibility) and if the training would impact parent-teacher communication as perceived by both teachers and parents.

SUMMARY OF METHODS

Study Design

We recruited licensed, private child care centers serving low-income families (i.e., eligible to receive child care vouchers) to participate in the study. Matched centers that agreed to participate were randomly assigned to either the intervention or comparison group. Teachers in

the intervention group received training and materials. The Family Map and TIPS trainings were provided on-site at the intervention child care center at times convenient for them, typically Saturdays or evenings. Teacher and teacher assistants were encouraged to attend. Lunch was provided during the training. Each classroom received Family Map assessment for each family and a TIPS Toolkit. Once trained, providers conducted the Family Map at enrollment as they occurred throughout the year. Each parent received a resource guide. Teachers met with families at drop off and pick up times to share information. Surveys were collected from teachers and parents at all centers in the fall (pretest) and again in the spring (posttest).

Intervention

Family Map Inventory. The Family Map provides a basis for the teacher and parent to talk about child development, parenting and the home environment. The Family Map is a semi-structured interview that assesses key aspects of the family and home environment associated with well-being in 3-5 year old children (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2007). The Family Map helps to systematically identify risk and protective factors. Providers are then able to tailor follow-up services to reduce risk conditions (e.g., food insecurity, insufficient sleep, harsh discipline, maternal depression or family conflict) or enhance protective factors associated with healthy development and school readiness (e.g., monitoring and supervision, consistent morning and bedtime routines, in-home learning activities, or enriching out of home experiences).

The Family Map was designed to be used during home visits with Head Start families. It has also been used during parent-teacher conferences and home visits. The Family Map includes survey and observation items organized into 12 modules that generally correspond to those in the TIPS program. The specific items in each module were developed from tools used in national studies of low-income families (i.e., incomes under 100% of the Federal Poverty Level) as well as tools with published reliability and validity. The 4-hour training prepared teachers to conduct the interview, record parents' responses and respond with appropriate parenting tips or resources.

Teaching Important Parenting Skills: TIPS for Great Kids! TIPS is based on the brief parenting intervention (BPI) model in which child care providers share research based information with families during brief, focused conversations. Teacher share information and resources tailored to meet parents' unique interests (e.g., choosing books, selecting toys), concerns (e.g., daytime toileting accidents, tantrums) and needs (e.g., housing, utility assistance) or provide anticipatory guidance (e.g., reading aloud, oral health care). The 6-hour TIPS training is conducted by certified trainers. Training materials include PowerPoint presentation, handouts that encourage reflection and application, a training guide, and a TIPS toolkit. Training activities include lecture, discussion, interactive small and large group activities and behavior rehearsal. The content of the training introduces teachers to the BPI model, reviews the impact of risk and protective factors on children and families, offers strategies for initiating positive parent-teacher dialog, and teaches the use of the TIPS toolkit. Targeted skills include listening for and responding to parents' interests and concerns, assessing parents' readiness for anticipatory guidance, recognizing parent's current level of knowledge and skills as the starting point for conversations, and motivating change. Teachers are encouraged to adjust their schedules to

allow for morning or end of day interactions with families, use strategies to resolve conflict, and promote mutual goals for children.

The TIPS materials are organized into a toolkit. Each toolkit contains: (1) *What the Experts Say* manual (a synthesis of the research on topics in 12 domains shown to be important to children's well-being); (2) parent tip cards (brief parenting message on a 4" x 6", 150 words or less, 6th grade or below reading level, in English and Spanish); (3) *Quick Reference* cards (main parent message and related parenting skills for each tip); and (4) *Parents' Guide to Community Resources* (indexed guide to community resources in Spanish and English).

MAJOR FINDINGS

Feasibility

Overall, the teacher ratings of the TIPS and Family Map trainings were positive. Half of the teachers reported completing one or more Family Map interviews. Teachers were generally comfortable conducting the family assessment interview, agreed that information learned in the interview helped them to understand the family and the child's classroom behavior. All teachers reported learning at least something about the child from the interview. Most (95.6%) of teachers reported sharing parenting tips. They generally agreed they liked the TIPS program, understood how the TIPS program worked, felt comfortable talking about tips, learned new things from TIPS, gave families suggestions using TIPS, thought parents used the tips given to them, saw parenting using tips given to them, and believed parents liked having the TIPS program in their center.

Parent-Teacher Communication

Both teachers and parents in the intervention and comparison groups were asked to report on parent-teacher communication. Intervention teachers reported higher communication patterns with parents, both in providing help to parents and in answering parent questions. Teachers in the intervention group reported parents asked for help with family problems and for information about parenting significantly more often than the comparison teachers reported. Similarly, intervention parents reported significantly more 'help received' than parents in the comparison group, specifically on items related to family and parenting. The results of the study indicate the intervention had a significant positive impact on teacher-parent communication from the teachers' perspective and parents' perspective.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

To adequately meet the needs of families of young children, experts recommend early care and education programs need to provide more parenting education and supports in new and more diverse ways. Considerable research supports the importance of strong parental involvement and

positive parent-teacher relationships on child outcomes. However, there is little evidence of meaningful parent engagement in early childhood programs (Olson & Fuller, 2003). In this study, teachers in the intervention group were provided tools (training and materials) aimed at increasing parent-teacher communication. The Family Map provided a tool for preschool providers to identify family strengths and needs. The TIPS program provided intervention teachers with training to build strong partnerships with parents and immediate access to research based information about child development, parenting, the home environment, and community resources.

This study provides some evidence that private child care providers are willing to expand their role to include family assessment and sharing of information and support with families. Parents were willing to participate in the interviews. Parents' reported asking teachers for help in areas related to family and parenting. This indicates that when given the opportunity, parent and teacher communication can move beyond 'small talk.'

Head Start centers are mandated to identify families' needs and strengths and establish family partnerships. The Family Map Inventory is a valid and reliable tool that has been successfully used during home visits. TIPS was developed in collaboration with the Family Map to provide an easily accessible resource for teachers to address needs and interests of families. This study provides some evidence that the Family Map and TIPS intervention improves parent-teacher communication and help-giving and is acceptable to both teachers and parents.

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