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KEYS TO INTERACTIVE PARENTING SCALE

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## **Building a Strong Program for Families and Staff By Assessing What Matters to Children: Their Parents' Behavior**

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### ***Research Shows Parenting Is Important***

Parenting behavior has consistently been proven to be one of the most important contributors to healthy child development and well-being (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2007; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010). Recent publicly-funded initiatives expect family service programs to use research-based models and provide evidence of effectiveness in parenting outcomes (Boller et al, 2010; DiLauro, 2010; WAVE Trust, 2013 ). Quality parenting <sup>1</sup> during early childhood promotes strong parent-child relationships leading to secure attachment (Benoit, 2004; Appleyard and Berlin 2007; Ginsburg et al, 2007; Balbernie 2013), protects against child neglect and abuse (Ross and Vandivierre 2009), improves school readiness (Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005), promotes children's social development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Brotman et al, 2008; Sturge-Apple et al, 2010), protects against child neglect and abuse (Ross and Vandivierre 2009), and buffers toxic stress that can have lifelong consequences on health and development (Shonkoff, 2012). Research has shown that the consequences of toxic stress are severe and quality parenting can buffer the impact of stress. As a recent report from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2012:1). stated :

Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support.

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<sup>1</sup> A variety of caregivers may serve in the parenting role, such as mothers, fathers, stepparents, grandparents, other relatives, family friends or foster parents. In this paper, the terms parent or parenting refer to anyone who provides significant caregiving for a child.

After thoroughly studying investments and the longstanding impacts of early childhood programs, James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics at the University of Chicago provides a cogent argument of reasons to invest in early childhood development as part of the social and economic policy to build future generations (Heckman, 2013). In a recent article, Heckman concluded:

The proper measure of child adversity is the quality of parenting — not the traditional measures of family income or parental education . . . . The scarce resource is love and parenting—not money (Heckman, 2012:12-13)

In the long term, quality parenting improves children’s school performance and social behavior (Belsky et al, 2007), decreases adolescents’ risky health behaviors (Hawkins et al, 1999) and improves adults’ mental, social, and sexual health (Sroufe et al, 2005; Hawkins et al, 2008). Due to this pivotal role of parenting, family service programs commonly focus on developing parenting skills in order to promote optimal child development (Gomby, 2005; Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007; Roggman et al, 2008; Balbernie, 2013). Furthermore, high quality interventions have been shown to improve parenting (Mathematica Policy Research, 2002; Sweet, and Appelbaum, 2004; Daro, 2006; Harding et al, 2007; Akai et al, 2008; Howard and Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Love et al, 2009; Knoche et al, 2012; Neville et al, 2013). Taking the long view, advocates for investment in early childhood prevention and intervention call for parenting training and support services as paths to equal opportunity, social mobility, and building human capital for future generations (Dreyer, 2011; Sawhill et al, 2013; WAVE Trust, 2013).

### ***Parenting Assessment: Evidence of Outcomes***

Although many family service programs have the goal of improving parenting, until recently, few have assessed parenting outcomes. The movement toward implementing evidence-based practices has stimulated greater interest in assessing parenting outcomes (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007; Ross and Vandivierre, 2009; Boller et al, 2010). Increasingly, programs in health, education and social service settings target early parent-child relationships for intervention (Tough, 2012) and incorporate parenting outcomes as part of their evaluations (Gomby, 2005; Harding et al, 2007; Akai et al, 2008; Parents as Teachers National Center, 2008; Love et al, 2009; Balbernie, 2013). Documenting outcomes can convince funders that proposed goals were achieved. Programs that can document increases in parenting quality will be able to compete more effectively for funding and resources. As shown in the text box below, this is the first of nine ways parenting assessment can strengthen your program.

## **9 Ways Parenting Assessment Can Strengthen Your Program**

1. Documents evidence of parenting outcomes
2. Tailors services to individual parenting strengths and needs
3. Monitors progress and guides service planning
4. Reinforces parenting progress and confidence
5. Serves as a parenting check-up as children develop
6. Shifts staff focus from child to parent-child interactions
7. Offers a common language for staff, families and programs
8. Builds reflective practice during supervision
9. Informs continuous quality improvement for staff and programs

One reason programs have not assessed parenting is, until recently, observational parenting assessment tools were too cumbersome for routine clinical use (Comfort and Gordon, 2006). Thus, instead of assessing parenting, and other outcomes<sup>2</sup>, many focus on assessing fidelity to the program model. Although necessary, assessing fidelity to the model is woefully insufficient. Programs need to assess parenting outcomes, because improvement in parenting is often a stated goal. Even when implemented with high fidelity, local programs serving diverse families and communities cannot be certain of their parenting outcomes due to local adaptations due to regional, cultural, temporal, or other contributing factors (Higgins et al, 2010; Home Visiting Research Network, 2013). When describing the results of evidence-based infant mental health interventions in the United Kingdom, Balbernie (2013: 216) reminds us of the need for local program evaluations:

*“A strong assessment tool will help you measure families’ progress in order to gather data about outcomes and fulfill state evaluation expectations.”*  
(Healthy Families State Director)

An ecological perspective makes clear that what may work brilliantly in a specific location might have no effect elsewhere, since ‘evidence based practices in prevention science which may have been tried and shown to be effective in one location under one set of historical and contextual conditions cannot be assumed to be effective in another’ (Schensul, 2009:243).

<sup>2</sup> Depending on the program goals, many other outcomes need to be evaluated, such as parent and child health and nutrition, home health and safety, child development, family needs and supports, and/or use of community resources.

Thus, programs need to be certain that the key outcome of parenting is routinely assessed to ensure program effectiveness and promote continuous quality improvement at the local level.

### **Observational Parenting Assessment: A Best Practice**

Now that practical, reliable and valid tools are available (for example, Baggett and Carta, 2006; Comfort et al, 2011; Svanberg and Barlow, 2013; Roggman et al, 2013), observational parenting assessment should be considered a best practice (Comfort et al, 2010). To assess parenting, family service programs sometimes use questionnaires regarding parenting attitudes, practices, or knowledge of child development (Gomby, 2005). However, research shows that parent self-reports often differ from actual practices (Lovejoy et al, 1999; Kashdan, 2009; Avinun and Knafo, 2013). Furthermore, surveys do not easily identify the various dynamic strategies used to guide children's behavior (Dumont et al, 2008), whereas an observational assessment offers insight into the parent-child interactions.

*"Anchors [behavior descriptions] really help keep you grounded. If I didn't know where to start, I went back to the anchors to help me score. The anchors really helped me go back to the family and talk about the parenting behaviors." (Early Head Start Family Advocate)*

Observational assessment offers an objective means to assess what parents actually do, rather than what they report to do in surveys. It is the parent's behavior that impacts the child directly, so behavior is an essential aspect to assess. Combining an observational assessment of parenting with a survey of the parent's knowledge, attitudes or practices, provides a more complete picture with which to target prevention and intervention services with families (Wacharasin et al, 2003; Huang et al, 2005). However, assessing only parenting knowledge and attitudes misses the vital ingredient of actual parenting behavior.

### ***Essential Elements of a Parenting Tool That Fits Your Program***

Structured observational parenting assessment involves watching a parent interact with his or her child and noting specific behaviors to learn about how each parent behaves with a specific child. The behaviors are then scored according to defined criteria. Following defined criteria allows those administering the assessment to use a standard framework, thereby becoming more objective.

When choosing a tool, the items assessed need to be relevant to the goals of the program and a good fit with the cultures of the families served. Parents of different races, ethnicities, communities or other cultural influences may express parenting behaviors in many different ways which are appropriate within their cultures and promote their children's development (Lynch and Hanson, 1992; Mesman et al, 2012). If different observers arrive at very similar results when assessing the same caregiver's behavior, the parenting assessment is said to be reliable.

A tool that measures aspects that make good common sense is said to have face validity. Face validity is especially important when using an assessment to guide services. Moreover, if the items on the assessment make sense, it is easier for staff to use with families and incorporate the results into services. In addition, effective tools go through a rigorous validation process. In the case of a parenting tool, a valid assessment should measure aspects of parenting behavior that research has shown to be important for the child's healthy development and well-being. A tool is said to have construct validity if it assesses what it claims to measure. A tool is said to have concurrent validity if it corresponds to other assessments administered at the same time. A tool is said to have predictive validity, if earlier assessment results anticipate future outcomes. In the case of parenting assessment, high quality parenting predicts better child outcomes at some later time (Hawkins et al, 1999; Kelly and Barnard, 2000; Comfort et al, 2011).

### ***Going Beyond Evidence; Added Values of Parenting Assessment***

In addition to its importance in program evaluation, parenting assessment proves useful clinically (Balbernie, 2010; Comfort et al, 2010). Using the assessment information, services can be specifically tailored to address each individual parent's strengths and needs. Upon entry into a program, an early parenting assessment can identify areas for immediate success. Early success promotes family engagement in services and reduces attrition. Parent engagement in family services has been found to be a valuable predictor of later parenting quality (Comfort et al, 2010). Ongoing parenting assessment enables providers and families to monitor their progress together and apply the resulting information to guide next steps. Mapping parenting

*"It provides learning opportunities for parents, as well as a chance for educators to build stronger supportive relationships with parents . . . and for development of specific parent goals." (Parents as Teachers Supervisor)*

assessment items to specific sections of a parenting curriculum or program manual can ease service planning for staff, thereby reducing the time and effort required to link assessment information to services.

Parenting assessment can document how well a family goal has been achieved. When parents and staff discuss specific information from assessments, they can collaborate as a team to focus

*“You have these specific items on specific behaviors, so when you are writing up your visit record you can identify strengths and areas to work on.”*  
(Parents as Teachers, Parent Educator)

their efforts, adjust their strategies and effectively promote children’s development (Taveres et al, 2010). To engage the family successfully, staff will need to adapt the type of information shared to each family’s level of comfort and understanding. When each goal has

been achieved, they can celebrate the success, and then focus on another area for family growth. This forms a cycle of assessment guiding intervention, which leads back to assessment. This cycle can improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of family services.

Many parents lack confidence. Using a validated parenting assessment, family service providers can provide objective support to reinforce parents’ progress and build their confidence. As children develop, parenting strategies need to adapt.

Observational parenting assessment at the time of key developmental milestones can serve as parenting check-ups, to watch how parents are adapting to their developing children. By identifying developmental challenges that parents are experiencing, family service providers can better support parents through these changes, and work together to prevent problems before they multiply.

*“It helps you see strengths that you may have missed. For this one family, I had an idea from knowing their past behaviors that . . . they wouldn’t do well . . . [Through the assessment] I was surprised to see some real strengths that I had never noticed before in all my dealings with the family.”*  
(Early Head Start Parent/Child Specialist)

A rarely recognized value of observational parenting assessment is that of improving the staffs’ capacity to shift their focus from the child to parent-child interactions. Many enter the field of early childhood family services due to their desire to help children (Zigler, 2010). However, it is through identifying and facilitating nurturing parenting behavior that we can often best serve children over

the long term. With training in observational parenting assessment, staff can step back from their own interaction and better observe a parent's interaction with his or her child. Even when observing families with which they have worked for a long time, experienced service providers have found that they see important things that they had not noticed prior to conducting an assessment (Comfort et al, 2006). This structured observation provides a framework with which to collect information for reflection.

*"We are experiencing such great outcomes for the families and the staff in reviewing the videos at staff meetings AND supervision. I think that to do this regularly is so important to utilizing this tool to its max!!" "The other thing I like is that I'm seeing where the Staff is at. Do they recognize the things they should? ...It helps me see where they are at."*  
(Two Healthy Families Program Directors)

One of the unanticipated benefits of implementing observational parenting assessment is gaining a common language to discuss parent-child interactions with families, among co-workers, during supervision (Comfort et al, 2006), and across agencies that serve young children and families (Barth, 2010). Defining the components of effective parenting provides a common vocabulary for staff and supervisors to use in planning and discussing their work with families. This common language can be used in opening conversations with families about parenting, reflecting on interactions with their children, and discovering parenting strategies that may work well for them.

Observational parenting assessment plays a valuable role in supervision and reflective practice.

[Reflective Supervision] is a collaborative relationship for professional growth that improves program quality and practice by cherishing strengths and partnering around vulnerabilities to generate growth. (Shahmoon-Shanok, 2009:8).

Supervisors can help staff build reflective practice when discussing parenting assessments by noting which aspects of the parent-child interactions they observe or miss, and reflecting on the interpretations of the parent and child behaviors. Recalling and reflecting together on the observation can improve mutual understanding of the dynamics between parent and child, and enhance staff service planning.



Parenting assessment can also promote continuous program improvement. By aggregating program results and analyzing outcomes, one can identify programmatic areas needing improvement, and assess the impact of programmatic changes. Moreover, one can identify staff that effectively improve certain elements, and these staff can serve as coaches for others. Thus, observational parenting assessment informs continuous quality improvement in staff and programs.

### ***Conclusion***

Observational parenting assessment generates evidence of program outcomes, and can improve family services. Using a reliable and valid instrument can prove a program increases parenting quality, which is valuable in making a case for funding. Furthermore, observational parenting assessment offers an array of benefits that strengthen programs, staff and families in numerous ways. Integrating a parenting tool into the set of child/family assessments can provide the missing

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piece in the assessment puzzle. A more complete assessment picture can improve service planning, enrich progress checks, enhance staff development, promote reflective supervision, and inform continuous quality improvement efforts.

Evidence for the importance of parenting to children's health and well-being continues to grow. Sensitive parenting is an important goal of most family service programs, which should be assessed and reflected upon during conversations with families. Considering these many values,



observational parenting assessment should be considered a best practice for family service programs.

Please feel free to share this paper with your colleagues. To learn more about an observational parenting assessment, the Keys to Interactive Parenting Scale (KIPS),

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