

How working with couples fosters children's development:

From prevention science to public policy

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In M. Schulz, M. Pruett, P. Kerig, and R. Parke (Eds.). (2009). *Strengthening couple relationships for optimal child development*. (pp. 211-228). Washington, D. C.: APA Publications.

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we describe the evolution of a collaborative research program that began in 1975. Although there may be coherence in a retrospective description of a lifetime of research, the longer-term picture was not apparent to us when we began. We could not have known that a pilot intervention project with couples becoming parents would turn into a three-decade preoccupation with couple relationships, children's development, and preventive interventions for families in varying economic circumstances. We could not have predicted that this research preoccupation would push us into the realm of engaging in dialogues with the press and collaborations with family agencies and government officials, in attempts to create new ways of strengthening family relationships. We did not start out with an advocacy agenda. As we will show in describing our research journey, we were eventually propelled into the policy world when what we were learning from the intervention research verified our early hunches and strengthened our convictions about what family relationships seem to need in order to be successful and satisfying for all the players. After finding such consistent results in two, and more recently a third longitudinal intervention study, we felt increasingly responsible for taking a more public stand because some of our findings contradicted accepted wisdom about the how working with parents can provide optimal benefits for children.

One item of accepted wisdom held by both mental health professionals and the general public when we began this work was (and still is) that family-based services to foster children's development should focus on parenting skills. In the results of all three of our longitudinal preventive intervention studies, an additional pathway to children's positive development emerged in which the quality of the relationship between the parents enhances the quality of each parent's relationship with the child. Each of these relationships plays a unique role, and in

combination, they foster children's adaptation (C. P. Cowan et al., 1985; C. P. Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007; P. A. Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson, & Measelle, 2005). Our data show a causal connection between the quality of the relationship between the parents and the cognitive and social competence of their children. Now we can argue that interventions that improve the quality of the parents' relationship as a couple have the potential for enhancing the effectiveness of the parent-child relationships, with long-term benefits for the children's development and adaptation.

We begin our account by sketching the social and intellectual context of the 1950s to 1970s, which played an important role in the development of our research and intervention ideas. We then describe the development and testing of our five-domain family systems model of parents' and children's adaptation, using both correlational and intervention designs with longitudinal follow-ups. Next, we briefly summarize a pilot study, the three intervention projects that followed, and key results. In a final section, we describe several recent forays into the world of family policy, primarily in the United States but also more recently in Europe and Israel. We explore how the kind of research programs that we and others have conducted can be used in policy discussions about services that foster children's development by helping parents with their dilemmas as partners and as parents. We end by concluding that the road from family research to family policy is circuitous, politically complex, but hopeful.

#### The social and personal context of our work: 1950s to 1970s

"The sixties" evokes images of social ferment, with student activism occupying headlines about support for racial integration, free political speech, and opposition to the Vietnam War. The women's movement began to re-define the aspirations of women and their roles in the family and work place. Families were different in the 1960s than they had been at the beginning

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century -- smaller in size, more likely in urban environments, and farther from parents, relatives, and the communities in which the parents had grown up. The de-coupling of marriage and childrearing and a rise in the divorce rate meant that more children were being raised by single parents. In this period, another new phenomenon became apparent: an increasing proportion of both single and married mothers were likely to work in the paid labor force.

It was clear then, and it continues to be the case, that there has been very little support from government, business, and the health delivery system for families attempting to thrive in the face of these major changes in family life. Since the sixties there has been a divide between those who believe that a return to traditional family values and structures will reverse what they view as a slide toward family decline and those who believe that families who are pioneering new ways of working and rearing children could benefit from help to make life livable in both arenas. We are clearly in the latter group. If there was any other serious public health problem that affects 50% of the population, society would spring into action to find a cure. Even with a 50% divorce rate, there are almost no services available for couples until they are in very serious distress – and few services in most communities for couples trying to sort out problems at an early stage.

Our awareness of these issues was heightened by our personal experiences. A couple immersed in the social changes of the 1960s, we had moved 3000 miles from our families of origin for Phil to begin a new job at the University of California, Berkeley. We arrived from Canada in 1963 with one child and another on the way -- one year before the famous Free Speech Movement and five or six years before the antiwar movement spread from campuses in the Western world to the larger society. During this time of changing societal values, we were adjusting to our move, feeling the pressures of making tenure, raising three active, curious young children, and wondering what had happened to our relationship as a couple. As our children

entered elementary school, we became painfully aware that couples around us were separating and divorcing at an alarming rate. The only help we could see for couples lay in the widespread offering of childbirth preparation classes -- devoted to intense preparation for the day of birth, with no preparation for the next 20 years as a family. Carolyn suggested that groups to help partners becoming parents stay focused on what was happening to their relationship as a couple as they were starting their families might alleviate some of the strains and impasses in couple relationships that were eroding marital quality and threatening marital breakups for many parents. Agreeing that this was worth a try, Phil suggested that it would be important to evaluate the intervention systematically. Like many academics struggling with personal and professional issues, we designed a study that we hoped would increase our understanding of what was happening to modern families – ours and theirs.

#### The Intellectual Context of our Work: 1950s to 1970s

Much of the historical context of our work has been summarized in the opening chapter of this volume. Here we add a few details that focus specifically on the transition to parenthood and the ideology of prevention. Before designing our study, we found that several sociologists and psychiatrists had written about the transition to parenthood. LeMasters (1957), a sociologist, argued that the transition to parenthood constituted a “moderate to severe crisis” for 83% of couples having a first child. Neither LeMasters nor the sociologists who responded to his claims (Hobbs, 1965; Hobbs & Cole, 1976; White & Booth, 1985) actually followed couples from before to after the birth of the baby. They relied on retrospective memories of new parents, who were asked how their relationship had felt before they became parents, which, of course, could have been colored positively or negatively by their current circumstances. A second line of research, pursued by clinicians treating troubled parents of babies conveyed their conclusions in

lurid titles such as “Pregnancy as a precipitant of mental illness in men” (Freeman, 1951). Given that the rare but serious syndrome of postpartum psychosis had obvious implications for both partners (Hamilton, 1962), it seemed curious that only one study described a systematic preventive intervention for new parents. Shereshefsky and Yarrow (1973) offered psychological help in a hospital setting to individual mothers, but not to their partners. Ironically, that study found that the best predictor of the new mothers’ postpartum adaptation was the quality of their couple relationships. More than a decade later, we discovered a couples approach in Christopher Clulow’s work with partners becoming parents in Britain (Clulow, Cleavelly, Coussell, & Dearnley, 1982).

Parke and his colleagues have described (Chapter 1) the emergence of family systems theory in the 1960s and a growing realization in the 1970s that fathers are centrally important to their children’s development. What was also new during this period, stemming in part from the politics of changing systems, was the notion shared by Community Psychiatry (Caplan, 1964) and Community Psychology (Sarason & Yale University. Psycho-educational Clinic, 1966) that economic and psychological benefits could be gained from intervening to prevent mental health problems from occurring in individuals and families. The 1960s also brought increased interest in group rather than individual interventions in the forms of group therapy (Yalom, 1995) and a plethora of T-group and other kinds of group experiences (Lieberman, 1973) that were billed as aids to personal growth.

In sum, the literatures on the transition to parenthood and family systems suggested that normative transitions, even benign ones, represented risks to couple relationships that could affect parent-child relationships and ultimately shape the course of children’s development. Intervening early in family life to prevent stress from becoming distress was an attractive option.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PREVENTIVE INTERVENTION RESEARCH PROGRAM

### The Becoming a Family project

In collaboration with psychologist John Coie and his wife Lynne, an obstetrical nurse, we set out to create a couples group for parents expecting a first baby – to begin in the last trimester of pregnancy and extend for 3 months after the birth. Although our initial focus was on what happens to couples during this major family transition, we were convinced that the enhancement of couple relationship quality would have benefits for the children as well.

The development of a family systems model. On the basis of the research literature, our own experiences, and pilot testing, we proposed that five major domains of family life would affect the adaptation of each family member:

- (1) *The level of adaptation of each family member, his or her self-perceptions, and indicators of mental health and psychological distress;*
- (2) *The patterns of both couple and parent-child relationships transmitted across the generations from grandparents to parents to children;*
- (3) *The quality of the relationship between the parents, including communication styles, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and (later) emotion regulation;*
- (4) *The quality of the mother-child and father-child relationships;*
- (5) *The balance between life stressors and social supports outside the immediate family.*

Our hypothesis was that couple relationship quality was not simply a matter of effective communication. Consistent with the ideas of family systems theory, the quality of relationships between family members reflects the sum of the individuals' adaptation, three-generational family patterns, both parents' relationship with the child, the balance between life stresses and social supports, and the inner perceptions and transactions that partners bring to their relationship as a couple. Similarly, as children's outcomes became more central to the design of our

interventions, we proposed that, in addition to genetic mechanisms, the child's academic, social, and emotional development would be a product of family adaptation in each of the domains.<sup>1</sup>

The design of the intervention. Since our pilot study in 1975 (C. P. Cowan, Cowan, Coie, & Coie, 1978), the couples group intervention we developed has become somewhat more structured and "manualized" in response to both the demands of funding agencies and the extension of the intervention materials from use with middle-income to low-income families, but our intervention approach has remained relatively consistent over time. Because we have described our approach to intervention in a number of publications (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000; C. P. Cowan et al., 2007; P. A. Cowan, Cowan, Measelle, & Schulz, April, 2006), we present only brief details here. We have always used male-female co-leaders with clinical training as leaders of the groups of 4-6 couples who meet weekly for periods between 12 and 24 weeks. The format of each group includes a "check in" during which partners are free to bring their own personal issues for the group's consideration or assistance, and a structured curriculum designed to cover one of the aspects of life in our risk model -- goal-setting and problem-solving for the individual parents, conflict resolution for the couple, partners' wishes to carry over or modify traditions from their families of origin, parenting dilemmas, work stress, and so on. The intervention targets each of these domains in which risk factors lurk and protective factors await discovery.

#### The Becoming a Family Project

On the basis of our pilot work, we secured funding from the National Institute of Mental Health. With the collaboration of a number of obstetrician-gynecologists, a local HMO, and advertisements in Bay area-wide community newsletters, we recruited 96 couples to participate in the Becoming a Family Project. In this and our second Schoolchildren and their Families Project, couples were asked to participate in a study of a life transition (to parenthood or to



school). We did not mention that an intervention was part of either study until the couples had completed an initial interview with one of our staff couples. That is, we were explicitly recruiting ordinary couples about to make a major transition, not partners who already felt in need of psychological help. Couples expecting a first child were randomly offered participation in a 24-week couples group *or* follow-ups at regular intervals with interviews and questionnaires but no special intervention (the “no-treatment controls”). The baseline, pre-intervention interviews and questionnaires were followed by post-intervention follow-ups when the children were 6, 18, 42, and 66 months old. Finally, because we did not want to assume that all the changes we would document over time were attributable to having a baby, we invited another 16 couples who had not yet decided about having a baby as a comparison group. These “no baby” couples were not offered any intervention but assessed at intervals comparable to those of the parents.

The transition to parenthood: longitudinal trends. Highlights from our data describe changes in couples from the pre-baby assessment through the first 18 months postpartum -- results that have also been found in a number of longitudinal studies without any intervention (for summaries, see Belsky & Pensky, 1988; C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Heinicke, 2002). Marital satisfaction declined significantly for the sample of parents as a whole, more quickly for the mothers than the fathers, although the fathers “caught up” with the downward slide by the time their babies were 18-months old. Both mothers and fathers reported a significant increase in the amount of conflict between them after their baby was born. On a Who Does What? questionnaire (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 1988) that examines the division of household tasks, family decisions, and taking care of the child (in pregnancy we asked about the anticipated division of child care), couples became more specialized and gender-stereotyped after their first child’s birth. Women were doing more household tasks than they were before the birth, and more

childcare tasks than either partner had predicted. Furthermore, discrepancies between the actual and ideal division of labor were correlated with marital dissatisfaction, and “who does what?” was #1 on the list of issues that led to couple conflict according to both men and women. We noted qualitative shifts in couples’ relationships with parents, in-laws, friends, and their work lives, but these did not produce systematic patterns in mean scores for the sample.

A consistent set of findings makes it clear that couples’ level of adaptation after the birth of their first child could not simply be attributed to having a baby. On almost every measure of adaptation, we found high correlations between pretest and posttest. How well each partner and the couple adapted to having a baby depended in large part on their pre-baby adaptation.

Correlations with children’s adaptation to school. We soon recognized that in addition to asking about the effects of the baby on the couple, we could begin to ask about the impact of couple relationship quality on the children’s development. With renewed funding, at both the 3-1/2 and 5-1/2 year follow-up we invited families to our project playroom and observed mother and child, father, and child, and then the whole family in challenging, tension inducing, and playful tasks (See Cowan & Cowan, 2000 for details). Coders rated each interaction on dimensions summarized in terms of Baumrind’s notion of authoritative parenting (Baumrind, 1979): warmth, responsiveness, structuring, limit setting, and making demands for maturity. The parents’ interaction as co-parents was independently rated on scales assessing negative emotion and conflict between them.

Structural equations for small samples (Latent Variable Path analysis with Partial Least Squares, Lohmoeller, 1989) showed that measures from five domains of the theoretical model predicted significant amounts of variance in the children’s adaptation to kindergarten (P. A. Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994). In combination, perceived positive relationships in

the family of origin, marital satisfaction in pregnancy, the balance of life stress and social support at 6 months postpartum, marital satisfaction at 18 months postpartum, and observed marital quality and parenting style at 42 months postpartum accounted for 52% of the variance in the child's academic achievement on the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT), 28% of the variance in teachers' ratings of the child's aggressive behavior, and 20% of the variation in teachers' ratings of shy, withdrawn behavior in the first year of school. These findings were described in the first of a number of papers (e.g., P. A. Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996; P. A. Cowan, Cowan, & Heming, 2005) that demonstrated that all 5 family domains contribute uniquely to our understanding of variations in the children's development and adaptation.

Intervention effects. The couples groups in this first study ended after 6 months when the babies were approximately three months old, and the first posttest assessment occurred 3 months later. We focus here on parents' marital satisfaction and adaptation (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000; C. P. Cowan et al., 1985). Although we found no systematic intervention effects when the babies were 6 months old, at the 18-month postpartum posttest, both men and women in the couples groups had maintained their level of satisfaction with their relationship, while the parents in the control group showed significant declines. More recently, using growth curve analyses in which the trajectories of every participant are calculated, we found that when the children had made the transition to elementary school -- 5 years after the intervention ended -- the distance between intervention and control couples was significantly greater than it had been 5 years earlier (Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006).

The addition of extensive observational techniques represented a methodological shift between the early and later phases of this project. This and many other enrichments to our work came from our participation in the first Family Research Consortium, a group of 10 family

researchers gathered by Joy Schulerbrandt at NIMH, chaired by Mavis Hetherington and David Reiss; two more of this volume's contributors were active members (Ross Parke and John Gottman). This group provided a unique chance to engage with others as they were grappling with similar research dilemmas, often before their studies were published, and this experience pushed our family research forward in a palpable way.

Despite the fact that (1) there were some lasting effects of the couples groups on the reported marital satisfaction of both fathers and mothers, and (2) parents' marital satisfaction was correlated with their children's adaptation, we did not find direct effects of the intervention on the children's academic or social competence, or on their internalizing or externalizing behaviors in their first year at school. We concluded that it was asking a great deal of an intervention occurring as the parents made the transition to parenthood to affect their children's adaptation five years later, especially because so many family changes occurred during that period of time. This line of reasoning led us to create a second intervention program for couples as their first child was making the transition to elementary school.

#### The Schoolchildren and their Families Project

In 1989, NIMH funded a preventive intervention study of 100 new families with a first child about to enter kindergarten. Our 5-domain family risk model (now 6, including sibling relationships) remained the same, and we used virtually the same assessment techniques, adjusting the family observation tasks and rating scales to take into account the increasing age of the child. This longitudinal study, completed recently, assessed the families when the first child was a pre-schooler (age 5), in kindergarten (age 6), 1<sup>st</sup> grade (age 7), 4<sup>th</sup> grade (age 10), 9<sup>th</sup> grade (age 15), and 11<sup>th</sup> grade (age 17).

The study also included a similar randomized clinical trial of a couples group intervention led by teams of male and female mental health professionals. The couples in the control condition were offered a chance to consult with their staff couple about any family issue or problem once a year for three years from pre-kindergarten through 1<sup>st</sup> grade. The ongoing couples groups, structured like those in our first study, offered both an open check-in and a curriculum designed to provide couples with non-adversarial ways to talk about the aspects of family life we have been describing. The major difference between the Schoolchildren and their Families Project and the Becoming a Family Project was (1) 16-week rather than 24-week couples groups to accommodate families in which most parents worked outside the home, and (2) two variations of the couples group intervention. During the open check-in time at each group meeting, we asked the leaders in one set of couples groups to focus more on parent-child issues (e.g., parents' reactions when child disobeys); in the other set of groups, we asked them to focus more on issues between the parents as a couple (e.g., partners in conflict about their different reactions to the child's disobedience). In all other respects, the two variations followed the same group structure, group process, and curriculum.

Families with a child making the elementary school transition. A Monograph that describes the first three years of this project (P. A. Cowan, Cowan, Ablow et al., 2005) reveals support for our multidomain model of the family factors predicting children's academic competence and externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Over and above the quality of fathers' and mothers' parenting, the mental health of the parents, patterns in their families of origin, current life stresses and social supports, the quality of their relationship as a couple contributed uniquely to the prediction of between 32% to 65% of the variance in their children's adaptation to school.

We reported on the patterns of overall change and stability in 100 families with a first child about to from before enter kindergarten through the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade and found, in general, without considering intervention participation, that there was improvement in many aspects of the parents' and children's adaptation. The most notable exceptions were in parents' marital satisfaction, which declined from the pre-school period to the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade, and parents' depression scores, which increased during that time. Looking at the children's responses to our questions between kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, we found increased self-confidence in boys' perceptions of their academic competence, but declining perceptions of academic competence in girls' reports. As in our earlier study, there was a great deal of predictability over time: fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters tended to remain in the same rank order relative to their age and gender peers in measures of adaptation and distress. Without intervention, families tended to follow developmental trajectories already set in motion before the children started school. This finding paints an optimistic picture for those doing well but leads to concern about children who start school near the low end of the adaptation continuum.

Intervention findings. When we compared families with and without the couples group intervention, we found that changes we observed between pre- and post-intervention -- in the parents' interactions as couples and with their child -- were associated with teachers' observations of the child in the first two years of elementary school.

Compared with parents in the control group, fathers in the parenting-focused groups were warmer with their child in the laboratory playroom, and mothers provided more structure for their child from pretest to the kindergarten posttest. Both of these variables are central ingredients of authoritative parenting. There were no effects of the groups with a parenting emphasis on the relationship we observed between the parents, but there were positive effects on

the child. Based on their responses to the Berkeley Puppet Interview (Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998), children of parents in the parenting-focused group described their adjustment more positively than did the children of the controls, and their kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers saw them as showing fewer internalizing behaviors (anxious, shy, socially withdrawn).

The couples-focused groups produced somewhat different results. Compared with parents in the control group, who showed more negative emotion and conflict as a couple in front of their children than they had before the children entered school, parents from the couple-focused groups showed stable levels of negative emotion and significantly less conflict as a couple as they worked with their child together in the project playroom. One noteworthy finding was that participants in the groups with an emphasis on marital issues were also using more effective parenting strategies with their child. Moreover, the children of parents in the couples-focused groups showed higher tested academic achievement scores and lower levels of teacher-rated aggression in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Analyses testing for mediation effects made clear that the improvements in observed couple interaction and parenting behavior were more likely to be associated with children's outcomes for intervention participants than for those in the control condition. The children of parents in both the parenting-focused and couples-focused groups showed the benefits of their parents' growing effectiveness, whereas shifts in parents in the control group were not systematically related to their children's school adaptation.

Our early published results described intervention effects over a two year period, from the child's pre-kindergarten year to the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade. More recently, we reported (P. A. Cowan et al., April, 2006) the results of a 10-year follow-up to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, using growth curve analyses of parent and child trajectories. These new results reveal that the parenting-focused and couple-focused interventions offered when the children were preschoolers have positive effects on

reported marital satisfaction, observed marital conflict, and both internalizing and externalizing behavior in the children as observed by teachers in Grades 1, 4, and 9. That is, when parents participated in a 16-week couples group before their children made the transition to kindergarten, the children showed fewer behavior problems during their transition to high school 10 years later.

We were gratified by the longterm results of this study, but aware that the participants in our first two studies ranged in socioeconomic status from lower middle-class to upper middle-class. Although some parents in these two studies reported struggling financially, we would not describe them as poor. Furthermore, the racial and ethnic composition of these two samples was largely Caucasian (about 85% European American and 15% spread among African American, Asian American, and Latino) and there were not enough non-white participants to allow systematic generalizations about possible differential effects of the interventions in different communities. We were interested in extending our intervention approach to low-income families and to more families of color.

### Supporting Father Involvement

In 2002, along with Marsha Kline Pruett and Kyle Pruett, we created the Supporting Father Involvement Project funded by the California Department of Social Services, with Linda Hockman, Assistant Chief of the Office of Child Abuse Prevention, as a working partner.

In the context of the arguments about social change that we summarized briefly above, a key concern has been the increasing absence of fathers from family life (Blankenhorn, 1995), despite evidence that married and cohabiting fathers are more involved in their children's lives than fathers used to be (Pleck, 1997). A large, emerging body of research shows that the issue of fathers' family involvement revolves around relationship quality; when fathers are positively



involved in the day to day care of their children, the children fare better on a number of economic, psychological, and social indicators (Parke, 2002). However, this is a correlational finding, and there is no evidence that increasing a fathers' positive involvement will actually increase children's well-being. One aim of this current intervention project is to test whether the correlational connection can be considered to be causal.

The study design. The California Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP) selected four county sites, each with an existing Family Resource Center, situated in predominantly low-income rural areas populated by a majority of Mexican American families<sup>2</sup>. The Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) team for each site consisted of a Project Director, two or three Case Managers, two Group Leaders, and a Data Coordinator. By dint of prodigious work, the staff at the four sites recruited a total of more than 300 families with a youngest child from birth to 7. Families with open cases involving family violence or abuse during the past year, and parents with severe mental illness or alcohol or drug abuse problems that interfered with their daily functioning, were referred to other services, because we felt that our group intervention would not be adequate to help with these more serious problems. This sample is low in income, with a median household income of \$28,000, when in California, \$40,000 is twice the poverty line for 4-member households. Half of the fathers and mothers have completed high school. Two-thirds of the sample is Mexican American, one-third primarily Caucasian. Three-quarters of the participants are married, and another 20% are cohabiting.

We began by testing two variations of our ongoing group intervention, in formats similar to those of our earlier couples group interventions, with many groups conducted in Spanish (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, and Pruett, in press). The first followed accepted wisdom that interventions for fathers should occur in the form of men talking with each other; groups of 8-10

fathers met together with our Group Leaders for 16 weekly meetings, with the mothers coming for 2 of the 16 weeks to meet with the female Group Leader while the men met with the male Group Leader. With this structure, we hoped to keep the women “on board” in making space for their men to be involved with the children. The second variation of ongoing groups followed our previous model more closely; two Group Leaders met with groups of 4-10 couples for 16 weeks. We reduced the emphasis on written materials in the earlier interventions, and constructed examples and activities consistent with the Mexican American family culture. All assessments at baseline and at 2 and 11 months post-groups were conducted in the form of individual interviews with each partner by the Case Managers.

Results. The interventions produced statistically significant positive effects over an 18 month period (Cowan et al., in press). Overall, a single informational meeting about the importance of father involvement (the Control condition) produced no positive change in the fathers or mothers who participated, and based on scores on several measures, there was evidence of increasing distress (e.g., declines in couple relationship quality and increases in symptoms of anxiety and depression). This increased distress occurred despite the fact that all families, including those in the Control group, had access to a Case Manager to help refer them to needed services over the period of the study.

By contrast, the ongoing group interventions had a positive impact on father involvement, which increased for men in both couples groups and fathers groups -- according to reports of both fathers and mothers. According to the parents’ descriptions of their youngest child, children of parents in the intensive group intervention remained stable in aggression, hyperactive behavior, anxiety/depression, and social withdrawal in contrast with children in the control group, whose parents reported that they increased on all 4 measures over 18 months. Couples

group participants maintained their level of marital satisfaction and adaptation over time, whereas the couples in the fathers group and control group showed significant declines, and the couples group participants alone showed a reduction in parenting stress. Although both couples and fathers groups produced positive effects lasting for almost a year after the interventions ended, there were stronger effects for the couples group participants on most of the measures, based on statistically significant contrasts with the parents in the control condition.

An Organizational Self-Assessment questionnaire (Vann & Nelson-Hooks, 2000) administered at the beginning of the study and again every year indicates that the agencies made significant gains in father friendliness in the first year in terms of increased awareness, programs for fathers, outreach to men, staff training, staff hiring, and the physical environment.

In a sample of 300 families, it would be extremely difficult to detect reductions in child abuse rates, but the significant differences in the intervention parents' reports of their own psychological well-being and of stable levels of hyperactive and aggressive behavior in their children, give us hope that participation in the group interventions will eventually be associated with fewer referrals to Child Protective Services. We will have additional information about harsh parenting when we complete the analysis of videotaped father-child and mother-child interactions obtained at the 18-month followup.

#### Some lessons learned

We have drawn four major conclusions from the results of our longitudinal preventive intervention studies. First, parenting classes without attention to the relationship between the parents may have limited effects on the family system. Second, despite the expense of mounting interventions for couples using clinically trained leaders, there appears to be high long-term payoff for mothers, fathers, and children. Third, the first two studies demonstrate conclusively

that there is a causal connection between improvements in the quality of marital and parent-child relationships and the children's adaptation: intervention-induced positive changes in family relationships were more likely to be followed by children's successful adaptation. Fourth, we have beginning evidence that a couples group approach with a structured curriculum and open-ended discussions of personal issues can have a positive impact on both middle-income and low-income Caucasian and Mexican American families. We are evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions now in a community in which a majority of the families are African American. We hope to be able to demonstrate in the future that this approach is beneficial for families from other ethnic groups as well.

#### FROM RESEARCH TO POLICY

The move from projects funded by NIMH research grants to contracts funded by the California Department of Social Services symbolizes, in part, our move from a sole focus on basic and applied research to a concern with family policy. For more than two decades, people asked, "Are government or private organizations using your intervention model to help couples having babies or couples with children making the transition to school?" We are aware of one systematically evaluated intervention program for couples having babies in Munich, Germany (Fthenakis, Eckert, & von Block, 1999), which showed results similar to those of couples in our California Becoming a Family Project. Despite the serious interest in our findings by government staff and service providers in many locales, lack of funds for staffing preventive services when funding is already scarce for existing family services seems to have blocked progress in actually implementing preventive programs. The arguments about "no funding" may be shortsighted. Although we have not done an econometric analysis of the interventions, it seems clear that the cost per family of preventive programs will be less than the cost of services for warring couples

who are parents and treatment programs for children who have developed longstanding behavior problems or diagnosable disorders.

### Changing discussions of family issues in media and government

In the 1992 presidential election campaign, Vice President Dan Quayle fired the opening salvo in the U.S. “culture wars” when he criticized the family values reflected by Murphy Brown, the lead character in a TV situation comedy who gave birth to a child without thinking about getting married. Over the next 15 years, with the rise in political attention to “family values,” debates within and outside academia focused on the necessity of a child having a father (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999) and the importance of marriage for the well-being of parents and children (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). While advocates of family policies cited research findings in support of their point of view, the inferences from research often violated basic statistical rules and assumptions. Virtually no one challenged the reporters and policy-makers who used research results this way to justify conservative family policies. In response, we joined the founding Board Members of the Council on Contemporary Families ([www.contemporaryfamilies.org](http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org)), a national multidisciplinary, non-advocacy organization of family scholars, researchers, and clinicians. CCF’s mission is to influence the public discourse on families by providing the media with a balanced view of what social science and clinical practice can and cannot say about hot-button public issues. For example, even if it is true that single mothers are more likely to be in poverty than married mothers (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), federal and state governments are not likely to make a dent in the poverty rolls by putting pressure on single mothers to marry. We think that social scientists have a great deal to teach politicians and the public about how to evaluate information being presented as fact.

### Enhancing couple relationships and father involvement

Although we have been working on interventions for couples since 1975 and on father involvement since 2002, we have been intrigued by the heightened interest in these two topics by the current (2004-8) administration in Washington DC. In its growing concern over the erosion of marriages and the problems of children whose parents' marriages dissolve, the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) used research-based findings from the 20-city Fragile Families Study (Harknett, Hardman, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001) as a rationale for government intervention. The finding was that most unmarried biological fathers have an ongoing romantic relationship with the mother when their child is born, but their presence in the child's life tends to fade over the first few years (Mincy & Dupree, 2001); this was used as the catalyst for government funded interventions for couples whose children are young -- both to strengthen their relationships and enhance father involvement in low-income families.

The Administration for Children and Families has funded many small projects and two very large ones that hope to include thousands of low-income couples, with the goals of supporting responsible fatherhood and strengthening marriage. One large intervention project conducted by Mathematica (Dion, Avellar, Zaveri, & Hershey, 2006) focuses on unmarried low-income couples having babies. Another study conducted by MDRC ([http://www.mdrc.org/project\\_12\\_62.html](http://www.mdrc.org/project_12_62.html)) focuses on married low-income couples, most of whom are already parents. Both studies use random assignment to intervention and control groups. We and others, including John and Julie Gottman (see chapter xx), are serving as consultants to guide the intervention work with couples and extend earlier preventive efforts to low-income couples. Both projects are designed to assess outcomes of the interventions -- on the parents' relationships as couples and on their young children's adjustment.

The policy implications of these activities are complex and controversial. Some colleagues argue that these interventions are as-yet untested with low-income populations; if one goal of the enterprise is to improve conditions for low-income families, why not supplement their incomes directly, or at least provide job training, since unemployment is so directly linked to low income? Our response is that since we are not aware of income interventions that have improved distressed couple relationships or parent-child relationships, it seems reasonable to give already evaluated relationship approaches a chance.

Supporting fathers. Our participation in the Supporting Father Involvement Project has taught us several new things about fathers' role in the family. Despite the relative neglect of fathers in most academic family research, there is a vast network of local, state, and national programs directed toward increasing men's family involvement. Unfortunately, very few of these programs include pre- and post-intervention measurements, and even fewer include control groups. This is both a research and policy issue, because the programs use government and private funds without evidence that the programs have effects on father-child relationships.

Based on the results of Phase I of the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) Project (C. P. Cowan et al., 2007; P. A. Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, August, 2006), California's Office of Child Abuse Prevention has funded Phase II, which has three goals: (1) to replicate the interventions with another 300 families to include adoptive and step-parents and other co-parenting pairs (mother and uncle, mother and grandfather), (2) to test the intervention's effectiveness in an urban African American sample, and (3) to disseminate results from the study across the state. The original four SFI sites have begun to approach other family service agencies in their county who want to make their organization more welcoming to fathers. At a statewide level, we are collaborating with Strategies, a group also funded by the Office of Child Abuse

Prevention, to create a training program to help other state agencies that want to incorporate the SFI fathers groups and/or couples groups into their agency services.

Israel and Europe. In recent years we have discussed our intervention research with family researchers and health professionals in Israel, Germany, Austria, and especially England, where we spent sabbatical semesters in two different years. We have also consulted with administrators and government officials about how prevention resources might be allocated to help children and youth. Of course, we are aware that conditions are different in each country, and that what works in the United States will not necessarily transfer abroad. From our experience so far, we have two general observations. First, although creating financial support for prevention services was far from the top of the list in the United States until very recently, it is near the bottom of the list in the other countries we have visited. The irony seems to be that other countries have substantially greater government support of health services than the United States does, but given the rising costs of these services, priorities have been to maintain the mental health services for families in urgent need. It remains to be seen whether an argument in support of prevention will become more convincing or strengthened by new empirical evidence over the next few years.

Second, in England, family policy is moving in the opposite direction from recent American strategies. The British Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) appears to be moving away from substantial support for services to help couples in distress toward funding services that focus on parenting education, while the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has moved toward substantial funding to evaluate new services to strengthen couple relationships. If the findings of the new, larger U.S. studies mirror the results of our own research, in which focusing on the relationship between the parents provided the most substantial benefits for parents and children, the redistribution strategy of the British government from



funding couples work to funding parenting programs may not provide the greatest possible benefits for children.

#### Family and policy/media: Different worlds, missions, and models of knowledge

The Dan Quayle/Murphy Brown episode illustrates the fact that discussions of families in the media and in government are similar to each other and basically different from discussions in social science research. Policy decisions are concerned with how scarce resources should be allocated, and services are expected to apply to all families in a given category. Decisions are often made on the basis of political or moral values, buttressed with opinions, anecdotes, and an eye on the potential consequences at the ballot box. In social science research, empirical evidence provides the only accepted foundation for knowledge, but there are always cautions associated with interpreting the findings.

We believe that social scientists have a responsibility to society to speak publicly when their findings are relevant to issues that affect the citizenry. But they must struggle to balance on a rhetorical tightrope. Politicians and reporters want clear answers and definitive statements. Our academic training, with its emphasis on probabilities and fear of overgeneralization, predisposes us to respond in ways that are frustrating to the discussions of reporters and government officials about how public and private sectors can enhance family life. We argue that social scientists are in a good position to teach those with policy clout about what is and is not sound science -- if they talk carefully and without jargon about what can and cannot legitimately be said on the basis of research findings and acknowledge how difficult it is to live in both worlds.

In contrast with prevailing attitudes when we began our program of research, there has been considerably more encouragement in recent years from professional organizations (in our case, the American Psychological Association, the Society for Research in Child Development, the

National Council on Family Relations, the American Family Therapy Academy, and the Council on Contemporary Families) for academic researchers to go public with the implications and applications of their findings. While we support this general goal, we believe that the use of social science research in policy arguments is undermined when the process begins with an advocacy agenda and reaches out selectively, as in legal briefs, to summarize all of the findings that support the author's original conclusion. Researchers are more credible, and more useful, when they communicate clearly what light their findings shed on the complex issues under discussion and also state clearly what we still don't know.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have described a career-long journey from conducting preventive intervention research with middle-class families, to creating interventions for low-income families, to engaging in policy-related applications of our work at national, and to a lesser extent, international levels. In retrospect, it may seem like a logical unfolding from one research project to the next, and from research in university settings, to studies in the community, to involvement in larger studies of family-related, policy-relevant research and services. We have always valued the importance of understanding how family relationships affect children's development. We have entered the policy arena only when our findings in a succession of studies supported our initial hypothesis that the couple relationship plays a central role in children's development, and our observation that this idea was being ignored in both family service practice and government policies. As we struggle to navigate the borderland between research and policy, we learn that just as media reporters' and politicians' treatment of research findings can raise our level of distress, the overly-careful hesitance of many social scientists frustrates those who need evaluation research to design sensible family policies. Despite the fact that people in social science and family policy

need each other, we are not likely to have a problem-free marriage. Like the road ahead for couples, the road for these two fields will be full of bends and unanticipated detours that may or may not lead to a shared destination or a satisfying long-term relationship. In the meantime, the two of us are truly enjoying the journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the five-domain model was developed in a study of couples and their firstborns. A sixth domain, the sibling relationship, becomes important from the birth of the second child.

<sup>2</sup> We have recently established a new site in a low-income urban neighborhood with a large proportion of African American families.