

DADS TUNING IN TO KIDS: PILOTING A NEW PARENTING PROGRAM TARGETING FATHERS' EMOTION COACHING SKILLS

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This pilot study reports the preliminary evaluation of an emotion socialization parenting program for fathers of preschool children. The program, Dads Tuning in to Kids (DadsTIK), is a specifically modified version of a universal evidence-based prevention program, Tuning in to Kids (Havighurst & Harley, 2007). DadsTIK teaches fathers emotion coaching parenting skills that have previously been linked to children's social-emotional competence and fewer behavior problems. The 7-session (14 hours total) group program was delivered to 43 fathers who completed pre- and post-program questionnaires assessing their parenting (emotional style, reactions to children's negative emotions, reactive/angry parenting, and parenting competence) and child outcomes (behavioral functioning). Program retention was excellent; and, post-program, fathers reported increased emotion coaching, decreased emotion dismissing, decreased angry reactivity and improved parenting efficacy and satisfaction. They also reported reductions in difficult child behaviors. These positive outcomes suggest DadsTIK warrants further investigation. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Emotional competence, or the ability to understand and manage emotions, is essential for children's success in their first year at school (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003). Parents influence the development of children's emotional competence in their modeling

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of emotional expression, their reactions to children's emotions, and by assisting (or not) children to learn about their emotional responses, with an "emotion coaching" style of parenting linked to more emotionally competent children (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Research has shown that it is not only mothers who play an important role in emotion socialization, fathers do too; yet interventions typically focus on mothers exclusively. This article reports a pilot study in which a universal parenting program that teaches emotion coaching skills was specifically adapted and targeted to fathers.

Emotion coaching includes being aware of and accepting children's emotions, empathizing with and labeling feelings, and assisting with problem solving where necessary (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). To teach this parenting style, Havighurst and Harley (2007) developed a universal prevention program for parents of young children called *Tuning in to Kids* (TIK). Randomized controlled trials of TIK have found increases in parent emotion coaching and child emotion knowledge, and reductions in parent emotion dismissing and difficult child behaviors in community samples (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010; Wilson, Havighurst, & Harley, 2012). Gottman (1998) found some links between parenting and child emotional competence were stronger for fathers than mothers; TIK participants, however, were mostly mothers.

Fathers need opportunities to learn relevant parenting skills. Currently, there are few father-specific parenting programs, and available programs typically support fathers' parenting involvement rather than teach specific parenting skills that affect child outcomes (Magill-Evans, Harrison, Rempel, & Slater, 2006). In contrast, the newly developed *Dads Tuning in to Kids* (DadsTIK), described below, aims to teach fathers the specific skills of emotion coaching linked to children's emotional competence.

The Current Study

The primary goal of this pilot project was to undertake a preliminary assessment of DadsTIK comparing preoutcome and postoutcome measures. Would improved parenting practices, consistent with improvements found in previous TIK trials, be achieved with an adapted program in a father-only sample; and would parenting improvements result in improved child outcomes?

METHOD

Program Description: Tuning in to Kids and Dads Tuning in to Kids

The TIK program manual (Havighurst & Harley, 2007) describes its theoretical framework and provides structured session plans for six 2-hour weekly group sessions, a DVD demonstrating skills taught in the program, and a CD of printable parent handouts. Sequential exercises teach parents a five-step process for emotion coaching as outlined by Gottman and DeClaire (1997), plus strategies for emotional self-care that assist in emotional awareness and help in managing parental anger and reducing reactive angry responses to challenging child behavior. Activities include psycho-education, DVD examples of emotion coaching and dismissing, handout materials, practice exercises, role plays, and group discussion.

To meet fathers' specific needs and preferences, parenting programs may need adjusting (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008). For DadsTIK, all TIK program scripts and exercises were rewritten to include only father-specific language and images (e.g.,

“fathers” or “dads” rather than “parents”). A seventh session was added (bringing total program time to 14 hours) because men report lower emotional awareness than women (Gratz & Roemer, 2004), and they may display greater resistance to acquiring the five-step process of emotion coaching (Gottman et al., 1997). This allowed a longer duration for fathers to practice the new skills at home (fathers typically have less time with children than mothers and therefore more limited practice opportunity), as well as enabling inclusion of additional content about the benefits of positive father involvement to children’s development.

Procedure

Approximately 95% of 4-year-old children in the state of Victoria (Australia) attend a preschool program staffed by qualified early childhood teachers. Some preschools also offer programs to 3-year-old children. Directors of preschools selected for convenience (availability of trained and experienced TIK practitioners and accessible venues for program delivery) distributed information to fathers in envelopes labeled “To Dad.” Inclusion criteria were English language proficiency and return of a baseline questionnaire before the specified cutoff date. Participating fathers attended one of five seven-session evening programs (7–10 fathers in each). Four programs were delivered by a female and male cofacilitator pair; one program was conducted by a male facilitator only.

Participants

Participants were 43 resident fathers (mean [M] age = 41.05 years; standard deviation [SD] = 3.95), with a preschool child aged 3.07 to 5.72 years (M = 4.82 years, SD = 0.54; boys = 48.8%). Most fathers (81.4%) were born in Australia; and 90.7% had completed high school and had a postschool qualification (certificate/diploma = 25.6%; bachelor degree or higher = 65.1%). Occupations were largely professional (76.8%); one father was unemployed. Gross family incomes (AUD) were \$40,000–\$59,999 (4.7%) \$60,000–\$99,999 (32.6%), and \$100,000 or more (62.8%).

Measures

Fathers completed questionnaires including the following scales at baseline (Time 1) and after program completion (Time 2).

Emotion socialization. The 21-item Parent Emotional Style Questionnaire (PESQ; Havighurst et al., 2010), previously adapted from the 14-item Maternal Emotional Style Questionnaire (MESQ; Lagacé-Séguin & Coplan, 2005), assessed fathers’ parenting style in response to child negative emotions. Parents rate their beliefs about their child’s emotions of sadness, anger and worry; responses are summed for two subscales: Emotion Dismissing and Emotion Coaching. Cronbach’s alpha for Coaching (11 items) was .68 at Time 1 and .83 at Time 2, and for Dismissing (10 items) .81 at Time 1 and .82 at Time 2.

The Coping with Children’s Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES; Fabes, Eisenberg, & Bernzweig, 1990) taps emotion-coaching skills. Twelve scenarios of child negative emotion are given and parents rate how likely they are to respond in each of six possible ways. Responses correspond to one of six theoretically derived subscales; we included four subscales relevant to DadsTIK content: Problem-Focused Reactions (PFR) and Expressive Encouragement (EE), Minimization Reactions (MR), and Punitive Reactions (PR). The

Table 1. Outcomes Preprogram and Postprogram: Paired Samples *t* Tests

Variables	Preprogram		Postprogram		Paired samples <i>t</i> test			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Eta</i> ²
PESQ: Emotion Coaching	39.24	4.44	43.66	5.42	40	-5.51	.000	0.43
PESQ: Emotion Dismissing	33.24	5.29	25.94	5.46	40	8.15	.000	0.62
CCNES: Emotion Coaching	116.63	16.92	136.01	13.58	40	-7.71	.000	0.60
CCNES: Emotion Dismissing	62.00	20.19	43.28	14.18	40	6.08	.000	0.48
PSOC: Satisfaction	38.31	6.41	40.51	6.74	40	-2.93	.006	0.53
PSOC: Efficacy	26.24	4.92	29.10	5.12	40	-4.51	.000	0.34
Paternal Reactivity/Anger	9.56	3.39	7.95	2.64	40	3.78	.001	0.26
SDQ: Total Difficulties	9.48	4.64	8.05	4.42	42	2.72	.010	0.16

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *df* = degree of freedom. Complete data sets were available for 41 fathers.

first two subscales (PFR and EE; correlated at $r = .41$) were summed into one total “emotion coaching behaviors (EC)” scale; and the latter two subscales (MR and PR; correlated at $r = .71$) were summed into one total “emotion dismissing behaviors (ED)” scale. Cronbach alphas of the combined scales for EC (.89, .88) and ED practices (.92, .90), respectively, indicated high reliability at both time points.

Parenting competence. The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Johnston & Mash, 1989) is a 16-item questionnaire measuring parents’ self-reported Satisfaction and Efficacy in the parenting role. The PSOC has been validated in other larger samples of Australian fathers (Rogers & Matthews, 2004). Cronbach alphas in the present sample were .81 at Time 1 and .83 at Time 2 for Satisfaction, and for Efficacy, .72 at Time 1 and .82 at Time 2.

Reactive/angry parenting. Four relevant items from a Hostile Parenting scale used in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (<http://www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au>) assessed reactive angry responses to difficult child behavior, asking fathers how often in the previous 4 weeks his child had gotten on his nerves when crying, and he had been angry with, shouted at, or lost his temper with his child. Cronbach alphas for this four-item (summed) Reactivity/Anger scale were .88 at Time 1 and .81 at Time 2.

Child outcomes. The 25-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2001) was used to assess child behavior problems. The SDQ has good psychometric properties, is widely used, and considered suitable for use with both clinical and community samples (Warnick, Bracken, & Kasl, 2008). The Total Difficulties score was used in the current study, with Cronbach alphas of .75 at Time 1 and .76 at Time 2.

RESULTS

Program completion rates were high; all sessions attended: 22 fathers (51.2%), 6 sessions: 16 fathers (37.2%), 5 sessions: 4 fathers (9.3%), and 4 sessions: 1 father. Outcomes were assessed using a series of paired samples *t* tests; results are displayed in Table 1. There were statistically significant improvements from Time 1 to Time 2, with eta-squared statistics indicating large effects (Cohen, 1988). In sum, fathers reported increased emotion coaching and decreased emotion dismissing in both parenting style and reactions to

children's negative emotions, decreases in reactive/angry parenting, and increases in feelings of parenting efficacy and satisfaction; they also reported decreased difficult child behaviors.

DISCUSSION

This pilot study explored the potential of the new DadsTIK program to improve fathers' emotion socialization practices and improve child outcomes by teaching fathers skills in emotion coaching. Formal evaluations of fathering programs are scarce (Fletcher, Fairbairn, & Pascoe, 2004), and preoutcome and postoutcome measures are rare (Holmes, Galovan, Yoshida, & Hawkins, 2010); hence the use of psychometrically validated scales preprogram and postprogram was a strength of this study.

Fathers reported significant changes both in their parenting style and in their reactions to their child's negative emotions; that is, they were more likely to encourage their children to express emotions and were less likely to dismiss or minimize children's emotional reactions to negative events, or punish them for emotional outbursts. These changes are consistent with gains found for (mostly) mothers in RCTs of the TIK program, upon which DadsTIK is based.

Fathers also reported feeling more efficacious and satisfied with their parenting after attending DadsTIK, an important outcome for any parenting program. More importantly, however, fathers reported reductions in reactive angry parenting; that is, they were less likely to shout at or lose their temper with their child. Paternal anger with preschool children has predicted behavior problems up to 4 years later (Denham et al., 2000); hence the reported reduction may provide long-term benefits for DadsTIK participants' children. Program participants were taught skills in understanding and regulating their own anger, as well as how to use noncoercive limit-setting strategies for child misbehavior.

Coercive parenting strategies (e.g., shouting, smacking) to manage child misbehavior are highly prevalent among Australian fathers, and this is not related to socioeconomic factors (Sanders, Dittman, Keown, Farruggia, & Rose, 2010). Fathers' frequent use of corporal and verbal punishment significantly affects child behavior problems in 1- to 5-year-old children, with its negative impact also unrelated to socioeconomic status level (Burbach, Fox, & Nicholson, 2004). These findings suggest that effective programs should be available universally to fathers. Yet many evaluated fathering programs target only fathers in specific at-risk groups, such as fathers of Head Start children (Helfenbaum-Kun & Ortiz, 2007) and fathers undergoing separation and divorce (Cookston, Braver, Griffin, Deluse, & Miles, 2006). There are few studies of resident fathering interventions (Holmes et al., 2010), and few quality studies of the effectiveness of universal interventions for fathers of preschool children (Magill-Evans et al., 2006). Given its design as a universal fathering program, more extensive evaluation of DadsTIK would be worthwhile.

Ideally, skills taught in father-targeted programs lead to improved child outcomes. Fathers in this pilot study reported improvements in child behavior; research should next investigate DadsTIK outcomes in a larger, more diverse sample, include a control group, and use multiple informants and, where feasible, observational assessments, as well as collect follow-up data to see if postprogram gains are maintained.

Conclusion

Fathers make a significant contribution to child development. To aid them in their important parenting role, they should have the same access as mothers to parenting programs,

and the current pilot study demonstrated that fathers can gain as much as mothers from participating in them. This study also showed that a community sample of fathers, when given the opportunity, were receptive and responsive to a parenting program focusing on young children's emotional development.

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