

## A randomised evaluation of the Better Parenting Programme in Jordan

Suha M. Al-Hassan, Associate Professor of early childhood and special education and Dean of the Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood, Hashemite University, Jordan, and Jennifer E. Lansford, Research Professor, Duke University Centre for Child and Family Policy, Durham, NC, USA



Parenting that is supportive, proactive, responsive and involved promotes children's positive adjustment. Photo • jcarillet/istockphoto

**Most evaluations of parenting programmes do not compare participants with a randomly assigned control group. An exception is the Better Parenting Programme (BPP) in Jordan. This article describes the background to the programme and outlines how the evaluation, conducted in 2009, found that participation in the programme had modest positive effects on parenting practices.<sup>1</sup>**

Many programmes designed to enhance children's development have attempted to alter parents' attitudes and behaviours as the mechanism to effect change in children. The importance of parenting is documented in a large body of research detailing how parenting of young children is related to children's subsequent cognitive, behavioural, and socio-emotional development, as well as how parents interact with other major socialising forces such as education systems to

promote children's optimal development. Parenting that is supportive, proactive, responsive, and involved promotes children's positive adjustment, whereas parenting that is neglectful, abusive, rejecting, and controlling predicts children's maladjustment.

When parents are struggling to parent well, they are sometimes targeted for interventions designed to improve their parenting and, in turn, their children's adjustment. Yet even parents who are not noticeably struggling can benefit from gaining new knowledge and being part of a supportive network of other parents, as evidenced by the large number of parents who join voluntary groups such as Mothers of Preschoolers<sup>2</sup> or Mothers & More<sup>3</sup>.

The key goal of parenting programmes is to enhance parents' knowledge, attitudes, and practices in relation

to caring for a child (Shannon, 2003). Optimal parenting includes a wide range of activities to ensure that children are cared for physically (for example, providing nutritious food, health care, and adequate sleep routines), cognitively (offering opportunities to learn and use language), socially (responding to the child with consistent, loving care), and emotionally (supporting the child's sense of self-worth). Because these are key challenges in parents' ability to provide optimal care for their children, parenting programmes often seek to improve one or more of these aspects of caregiving.

Given the importance of parents in promoting optimal child development and the success in other contexts of parenting programmes in promoting positive parenting and child adjustment, the Better Parenting Programme was designed to enhance parenting in Jordan.

#### **The context of parenting in Jordan**

Almost 37% of the Jordanian population is under the age of 15 and the national average of number of children per household is 5.2 (Department of Statistics, 2012). Only 35% of Jordanian children attend preschool and less than 2% attend any form of daycare (Department of Statistics, 2007). Instead, the majority of children are cared for at home, primarily by their mothers.

Over the past decade, Jordan has made remarkable achievements in the areas of child health, nutrition and education. Infant and under-5 mortality rates reflect improvements in meeting the survival rights of Jordanian children and are now low (18 and 21 per 1000, respectively, in 2011 compared to 33 and 40, respectively, in 1990 (UNICEF, 2014). This success in promoting child survival has motivated the Jordanian Government to focus more closely on child development and protection issues.

One major context for parenting in Jordan lies in the emergence of a National Plan of Action in early childhood for the years 1993–2000, and the Jordanian Plan of Action for Children 2004–2013 (Al-Hassan, 2009). The vision set forth in these plans is to create a safe environment that develops the capabilities of children

by supporting legislation, policies and programmes that cater to the physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being of children. The National Plan of Action for Children aims at providing Jordanian children with the best possible start in life by promoting a healthy life, giving them access to basic, quality education, and providing them with ample opportunities to develop their individual capacities in a safe and supportive environment protected from abuse, exploitation, and violence.

#### **The Better Parenting Programme**

A major vehicle through which child development and protection have been promoted is the Better Parenting Programme (BPP), which was designed after a national Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey conducted in 1996 (Brown, 2000).

An initial evaluation of the programme was carried out in 2000. This commended the achievements of the BPP, in particular the level of coordination between the different parties and the low cost of reaching parents and their children, which amounted to only 3 dollars (US) per child. An important recommendation was the need to expand the BPP's scope to a more holistic early childhood approach, including protection of children from abuse and neglect (Brown, 2000). These recommendations were taken into consideration in the design of a revised BPP, which started in 2003.

UNICEF and other key government and civil partners have supported the BPP as a nationwide programme aimed at empowering parents and caregivers to provide a stimulating, loving and protective environment at home, through equipping parents and caregivers with skills and information to enable them to promote the psychosocial, cognitive and physical development of their children aged 0–8 years. The BPP consisted of a series of lessons (comprising a total of 16 hours) that focused on specific areas of parenting knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. The lessons were led by social workers, health workers, kindergarten teachers and paraprofessionals who had been instructed in how to deliver the lessons by centralised trainers. The



**The Better Parenting Programme in Jordan is a nationwide programme aimed at empowering parents and caregivers to provide a stimulating, loving and protective environment at home.**

Photo • Jim Holmes /Bernard van Leer Foundation

facilitators' manuals included session guides, printed booklets, flip charts, audio-visual materials, posters, parent activity sheets, and recommended take-home reading materials for the participants. Local facilitators had the flexibility to use all or a subset of the lessons and to follow time schedules that worked best for the participants. Some facilitators implemented the programme over a period of 3–4 consecutive days, some conducted the training once a week for a month, and some conducted the training twice a week for 2 weeks.

A 2009 evaluation (Al-Hassan, 2009) investigated the effects of the Better Parenting Programme on parents' knowledge and behaviour in three domains:

- the extent to which parents obtain knowledge related to child development and parenting skills
- changes in parents' activities, expressions of contentment, and discipline with children

- changes in parents' perceptions of behaviours that would constitute child abuse or neglect as a result of participation in the programme.

A sample of 337 parents and caregivers throughout Jordan was drawn to represent the three geographical regions in which the BPP is delivered (North, Middle, and South parts of the country). Participants heard about the BPP from charitable organisations, school principals, community centres, programme staff, and the media. Because the BPP targeted children's primary caregivers, the large majority of participants were women (94%). Participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (which participated in the BPP) or a control group (which did not participate in the programme). Both groups completed questionnaires at two time points: once before and once after the experimental group participated in the BPP.

#### **Findings of the 2009 evaluation**

The study focused on comparing those who attended the programme (the experimental or intervention group) with those who did not (the control group). The main findings were as follows.

- There were no significant changes in the reported frequency with which the control group engaged in activities with their child. In the experimental group, after attending the programme participants reported spending significantly more time with their children playing and reading stories. Neither the control group nor the experimental group changed over time in their expressions of contentment with the child; both groups reported high levels of positive forms of expressing contentment at both time points.
- Results from both the control group and the experimental group showed an increase in the use of positive discipline methods and a decrease in using negative discipline methods over time. Specifically, participants in both groups indicated an increase in taking away privileges, and a decrease in beating the child and calling the child names.
- For both groups the behaviour of shouting at the child increased significantly, despite the fact that it is considered undesirable. Participants who attended

the programme (but not those in the control group) reported a significant increase in explaining to the child why something he or she did was wrong.

- In questions about discipline methods that would be used if the child misbehaved during a visit to a neighbour, participants in both the experimental group and control group were significantly less likely to ignore the child, give the child sweets to keep him or her quiet, and beat the child. The experimental group also showed a significant increase in positive responses on the item regarding showing the child things he or she could do.
- No significant changes were found over time in perceptions by either the control group or the experimental group of behaviours considered to be child abuse. However, after attending the programme a significantly greater percentage of the experimental group reported that they regarded leaving the child alone at home, having someone underage take care of the child, and not buying the child new clothes as neglect. Perceptions by the control group regarding behaviours concerning child neglect did not change significantly over time.

#### **Discussion: positive but small effects**

The findings provided modest support for the benefits of participating in the BPP. Over time, participants in the experimental group (but not the control group) improved on parenting knowledge, spending time playing and reading books with their children, using more explanations during the course of disciplining their child, and accurately perceiving behaviours that would constitute neglect. Because participants were randomly assigned to the intervention or control group, these differences between groups in change over time can more confidently be attributed to participation in the BPP. As in other parenting interventions (Layzer *et al.*, 2001), the effects of the BPP were positive but small.

For several constructs assessed, participants in the control group as well as the experimental group showed improvements over time. For example, participants in both groups showed an increase in using positive discipline methods and a decrease in using negative

discipline methods. This implies that, with the exception of using more explanations (which improved for the experimental group only) something besides participation in the BPP was responsible for changes in reported discipline strategies over time.

It is possible that the process of completing the pre-programme questionnaire caused participants to reflect on their discipline practices and to attempt to change those they deemed to be less desirable. The control group consisted of individuals who were interested in attending a parenting programme, so they were probably willing to improve their knowledge and practices; merely completing the first questionnaire may have alerted them to some parenting practices that they then reconsidered. It is also possible that participants in the control group interacted in community settings with participants in the experimental group and learned information being conveyed in the BPP from members of the experimental group.

Most programmes designed to improve parenting have not been evaluated rigorously through random assignment to control and intervention groups (Lansford and Bornstein, 2007). The findings from the present study suggest that the benefits of such programmes may be overestimated if they are not compared to a randomly assigned control group that did not receive the intervention.

Even at the time of completing the pre-programme questionnaires, most participants in the experimental group and the control group accurately identified behaviours that should be considered child neglect and abuse. This indicates that there is a high degree of community awareness regarding these issues, probably stemming from many sources such as the media. Many parents in both groups also were engaging in positive behaviours with their children. Thus, the BPP should be framed in terms of enhancing already positive parent-child relationships rather than as addressing deficits. In previous research, working with parents' strengths and providing support that fits their needs has been related to more positive outcomes for parenting programmes (Sanders *et al.*, 2003).

Future research experimentally manipulating key features of the programme (such as the timeframe for implementation, particular lessons offered) could determine the most effective combination of features so that future iterations of the Better Parenting Programme could implement these features consistently in all locations. Furthermore, future iterations of the BPP could offer more intensive services to at-risk families for whom the relatively brief, education-oriented focus of the current BPP may not be sufficient to meet their needs. More at-risk families often benefit from multimodal and long-term interventions.

Given the context in Jordan in which the Government is promoting child development and protection issues, it makes sense to focus on improving parenting as a way of optimising children's development. Because participants who were randomly assigned to participate in the Better Parenting Programme demonstrated modest improvements in parenting knowledge, spending time playing and reading books with their children, using more explanations during the course of disciplining their children, and perceiving particular behaviours as constituting child neglect, compared to parents who were randomly assigned not to participate in the programme, one can conclude that the programme is contributing to the promotion of positive parenting in Jordan. Because the Better Parenting Programme has been implemented widely, even small effects within individual families may amount to large effects for the country as a whole.

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#### Notes

- 1 This research was supported by UNICEF and Fogarty International Center grant R03-TW008141. This article is a summary of the authors' research paper 'Evaluation of the Better Parenting Programme in Jordan' (Al-Hassan and Lansford, 2011).
- 2 Information about Mothers of Preschoolers is available at [www.mops.org](http://www.mops.org)
- 3 Information about Mothers & More is available at [www.mothersandmore.org](http://www.mothersandmore.org)