

HANDLE WITH CARE

Executive Summary



OVERVIEW

Handle with Care is a simple, culturally-relevant interactive parenting program that promotes the mental health of young children from birth to 6 years and their parents or caregivers. Handle with Care is designed to reduce inequities and build on individuals' strengths, traditions and knowledge. Hincks-Dellcrest Institute recently completed a rigorous evaluation of this program. The program was shown to be compatible with the needs of individuals and communities with various sociodemographic characteristics who experience a variety of mental health risk factors. These risk factors include, but are not limited to low income, social isolation, low sense of belonging and experience of stigmatization. Findings showed that the program was well received by Aboriginal People, new immigrants, single parents and other individuals and populations who are at risk for experiencing mental health challenges as a result of risk indicators mentioned above. Our scientific research supports the efficacy of Handle with Care in achieving its outcomes.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Mental health or the social-emotional and behavioural wellbeing, is an integral part of healthy development. The foundations of mental health are shaped from the earliest days of life. Brain development in the early years of life is known to set neurological and biological pathways that affect health, learning and behavior. Thus, supporting children's mental health is an everyday aspect of health care, just as we support healthy bodies by ensuring children eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. The goal of this project was to raise awareness about the importance of the first 6 years of life in children's mental health using a strengths-based, supportive parenting intervention. The Handle with Care parent/caregiver program promotes awareness about parents' and caregivers' role in strengthening the mental health of young children and of how stimulating care and nurturing environments can help children flourish, thrive and grow into healthy adults with positive long-term outcomes.

Handle with Care assumes every parent and caregiver has problem-solving skills and resources and wants what's best for the children in their lives. It builds on participants' strengths and capacities, engages them and offers opportunities to maximize a sense of control over their environment. It provides practical ways to apply research information in a context of interactive activities that promote mental health. The program covers the basic 'building blocks' for young children's mental health: (1) fostering secure attachment, (2) building positive self-esteem, (3) helping children express emotions in a constructive way and (4) fostering peer relationships. Based on the premise that well-being of people who care for children is important in itself as well as for the children, the Handle with Care program set ambitious outcomes that targeted the improvement of parents'/caregivers' mental health. These include reduction of symptoms associated with depression, enhanced parenting sense of competence and use of self-care practices. The Handle with Care curriculum covers these topics over an eight-week period.

POPULATIONS INVOLVED AND THE PROJECT DESIGN

Handle with Care is appropriate and accessible for participants from various backgrounds. The 48 participating communities shared the common features of low income and low literacy but differed in terms of geography (i.e., rural, inner city), population (i.e., new immigrants, on- and off-reserve Aboriginal People, Caucasians), and family stressors (e.g., fathers employed out of the community). The Handle with Care approach is participatory rather than didactic. It builds on participants' strengths and ways of knowing and promotes information sharing and mutual support.

Mixed method research was used with complete data from 352 individuals (191 Immediate Intervention and 161 Control/Delayed Intervention participants). There were 14% Aboriginal, 38.6% new immigrant and 47% Caucasian participants. All participants completed a baseline assessment (pre-

test), an assessment at the end of the 8-session program (post-test) and a 4-month follow-up. We conducted 21 focus groups with parents/caregivers and 7 focus groups with facilitators. We also interviewed project partners and the four Site Research Coordinators to gather different perspectives regarding the program, implementation processes, fidelity, efficacy, and ways to build sustainability.

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM ON THE OUTCOMES

Evaluation findings indicated positive program effects on participating parents' and caregivers' mental health (flourishing), parenting sense of competence and self-care practices. For example, parents and caregivers in the intervention group reported significant improvements in symptoms associated with negative mental health (languishing). They reported having more positive feelings about themselves, people around them and the environment. Parenting sense of competence improved significantly in the intervention group. Parents and caregivers also reported gaining confidence in their parenting practices and increased positive feelings about their relationships with their children or children in their care. Self-care and wellness practices improved significantly in the parents and caregivers and continued to improve over the life of the project.

Focus group findings indicated that participants also gained a greater appreciation for diverse personalities and temperaments in the family, especially children. They also gained a more accurate perception of acting as role models for their children to exemplify acceptable ways of regulating and expressing emotions. Moreover, participants expressed a positive change in their children and family functioning. In some cases there were reports of improved relationships in adults in the family. Finally, some of the Aboriginal participants mentioned that they can now forgive their parent for the lack of positive parenting, because they now understand that their parents were also stripped of the love of their families and did not have any role models in their lives.

LESSONS LEARNED/RECOMMENDATIONS

Handle with Care considers rights, values and needs of vulnerable populations, and promotes access and equitable distribution of the program benefits. The program is compatible with provincial/territorial strategic plans that focus on wellness, prevention, early intervention, and health/mental health promotion activities tailored to meet the particular needs of communities. Our recommendations are framed within four areas for strategic initiatives:

(1) Community engagement continuum-program sustainability: raising awareness of Handle with Care and training additional community-based facilitators to make it accessible to more families, childcare practitioners, and family resource programs in at-risk communities,

(2) Horizontal scaling up: moving from targets of change to agents of change by extending the reach of the program with a focus on making it available to new provinces and territories,

(3) Vertical scaling up: promoting the program within an empowering environment in which policy making is participatory by actively connecting to the nexus between policy makers with practitioners, researchers and social, religious/faith or spiritual groups who are involved in both advocacy work and implementation of Handle with Care, and

(4) Functional scaling up/Diversification: making a systematic effort to increase the impact of the multifaceted versatile and proven Handle with Care program by making it part of a universal wellness campaign/initiative, increasing accessibility to diverse age groups (children and adolescents) or individuals with diverse needs and risk factors. These may include those who are victims of domestic violence and child abuse. Such diversification will provide opportunities for affordable training and the possibility for continuous evaluative support through an inter-professional network of researchers, community members, policy makers, health professionals, and health economists.