

NURTURING PARENTING PROGRAM: A STUDY OF ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVITIES  
DURING THE PARENT AND CHILD ACTIVITY TIME

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**Title**

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State  
University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Nurturing Parent Program (NPP) aims to build protective factors in families such as: nurturing, attachment, social connections, parental resilience and knowledge of child development. This qualitative study looked specifically at the activities and engagement between parents and children during the parent and child activity time. First, 13 trained children's facilitators of the NPP from 10 different sites across North Dakota participated in a focus group during the annual statewide conference. Next, adult NPP participants ( $n = 11$ ) were interviewed on NPP and parent-child activity time. Most facilitators felt the curriculum was outdated and could list activities that produced high levels of engagement, but often these were supplemental activities they found elsewhere. Interviews with parents resulted in a list of parent-child activities that they valued. Most did not mention family time as a component they disliked, but rather the problem of straying off topic during the parent facilitator sessions.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Child Abuse

The incidence of child abuse and neglect in the United States is disturbing. More than five children in this country die every day due to child abuse and neglect according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011). This rate has consistently increased since 2003. In the 2011 Federal fiscal year, an estimated 3.4 million referrals involving 6.2 million children were reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) Agencies across the United States for alleged abuse and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). CPS agencies estimated of the reports made regarding child maltreatment, there were approximately 681,000 confirmed cases of neglect and abuse nationwide. Neglect was the most common form of child maltreatment of the 681,000 reported cases, representing more than 75% of the confirmed cases (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Child abuse in the United States occurs at every socioeconomic level, across all cultures, within all religions, and at all levels of education (Maher, et al., 2011). Tragic consequences can occur from maltreatment and abuse. In 2011 alone there were 1,570 children who lost their lives due to maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Children who experience child abuse and neglect are 59% more likely to be arrested as juveniles, 28% more likely to be arrested as adults, and 30% more likely to commit violent crimes (United States Government Accountability Office, 2011).

The Adverse Childhood Experience Study (ACE) was conducted in partnership with the Kaiser Permanente Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control. This study is one of the largest investigations ever conducted to date to assess the association between childhood maltreatment and later-life health and well-being. This study was conducted between 1995 and 1997 and was completed by 17,500 adults. Its findings indicate a correlation between childhood

stressors and adult health. The study found that as children, 28% of adults indicated they had been physically abused, 21% sexually abused; 15% emotionally neglected; 11% emotionally abused; and 10% physically neglected (Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, 2012). The data from this study make a clear link between the effects of child abuse/neglect and both physical and psychological problems in adulthood. This study indicates that there is a negative effect that child maltreatment can have on human development as people grow into adulthood. The ACE study confirms the significant need for family- focused prevention/intervention programs to help combat neglect and abuse in the family structure.

### **Prevention Programs-Parent Training**

Parent training programs can be defined as interventions or programs which provide parents with parenting training and skills. According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, parenting classes have been found to help parents gain the problem-solving techniques that are necessary to deal with circumstances they might face when it comes to raising a child in a healthy way (CDC, 2009). Parent education provides a network for parents to learn positive techniques outside of their own experiences and upbringing. Parents are able to learn new skills and techniques that can contribute to healthy and positive child rearing (Cowen, 2001).

There are three distinct levels of prevention in parent training programs. In *primary prevention programs* there is a zero tolerance for abuse and neglect. Education is incorporated at a pre-natal stage to prevent abuse and maltreatment from taking place. The *secondary level* of prevention is an intervention designed to occur at early warning signs of maltreatment. The third level is *tertiary prevention*, which specifically focusses on the treatment when abuse and maltreatment have already taken place. The main focus during this level is to teach new skills

and techniques to replace previous parenting behaviors, also known as the process of re-parenting.

Parent training can be used as primary preventive education for the general community, secondary prevention for high risk groups such as teen parents, and tertiary prevention with families where abuse or maltreatment has already occurred (Cowen, 2001). Furthermore, when parents have a history of possible child neglect or family abuse, the state or local child welfare agency can mandate parents to take parenting classes (Morrison Dore & Lee, 1999). Parent training programs can benefit the child as well as the parent. Children who are raised in a supportive, warm environment are more likely to have healthy relationships and have higher levels of empathy than children who are not raised in a warm and nurturing environment (Van Doorn, et al., 2008). The higher the quality of the parent/child relation, the greater the chance of positive relationships with others; healthy parenting practices correlate with positive relationships in children and adolescents and gives them the opportunity to build a foundation for other healthy relationships into adulthood (Katz, et al., 2011).

Research over the past decades has shown that parent education can strengthen families and reduce the risk of maltreatment (Cowen, 2001). Parent training programs can be defined as interventions or programs which provide parents with parenting training and skills. Parent education can be delivered in a variety of ways. Classes can be done in a group setting such as a classroom, individually in an office or home setting, or online. Parenting classes also use a variety of ways to present the information such as direct instruction, group discussion, videos, role playing and other various formats. Effective parent training can have a significant impact on the family structure by changing parents' behaviors and attitudes and by promoting protective



factors which in turn has a positive impact on the family as a whole (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

Parental influence and practices play a large role in the development of children, in both secure attachment and concepts of socialization. Madsen and Collins (2011) studied conceptual links between aspects of adolescents' dating experience and concluded that strong relationships with care providers set the foundation for children to have healthier and more developed nurturing capabilities. Research has also shown that healthy positive parental relationships are directly correlated to the level of intimacy and closeness in adolescent relationships in regard to trust and expectations (Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Positive parental involvement which consists of low conflict with little arguing and high shared time such as spending time together in in shared interest activities has been strongly linked to more positive experiences in adolescence; whereas negative parental involvement and high conflict with low shared time has been directly associated with negative experiences (Kan, et al., 2008). The level and the frequency of the parental care-giving role can have a great impact on many facets of relationship experiences with children. Parental monitoring of children, levels of family conflict, and parental divorce can also play a significant role in a child's socialization and development (Nosko, 2011).

Different socialization theories have stated that children learn how to socialize with their peers from the model their parent's exhibit. The parent/child influence in turn has a significant impact on the child's interpersonal and socializing skills in how they relate to other children, adults and family members. Past research has suggested that children who experience parental violence first hand or see it inflicted on other family members are more likely to accept and experience violence in their own relationships (Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010). In a recent study of

exposure to interparental and friend violence, adolescents who personally experienced family-centered violence consistently were more likely to perpetrate in later dating violence in adolescent dating relationships (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004). This may suggest that the parent may have a greater influence than peers.

### **Nurturing Parenting Program**

The Nurturing Parent Program is one of the many parenting programs in the last few decades that have been developed to promote empathy, attachment, and healthy socialization patterns in the parent-child relationship. NPP was first developed in the early 1980's by Dr. Steven Bavolek and was built on the philosophical foundations of the importance of empathy, positive self-worth, and respectful discipline (Bavolek S. J., 2000). National implementation of the program began in 1985. In the past 30 years, approximately 14,000 agencies have used the NPP worldwide, affecting an estimated 1.1 million families (Bavolek S. J., 2000). The NPP program has been implemented in all 50 states and in many other countries including: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, England, Taiwan, and Norway (Hodnett, Faulk, & Maher, 2009). The NPP aims to build protective factors in families such as: nurturing, attachment, social connections, parental resilience, and knowledge of child development. When these factors are present there is a greater chance for the increase of health and well-being of children and families, and the likelihood of abuse and neglect is greatly reduced (Bavolek S. J., 2000).

The NPP is an evidence -based program that is recognized by the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, a list administered by the U.S Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Bavolek S. J., 2000). The empirical research that has been done on the NPP suggests that it may be an effective tool to help educate parents about the importance of empathy, attachment, proper developmental expectations, self-care, and refraining

from corporal punishment. The program is backed by extensive research over the last 30 years, but most of this research has been conducted by the developer and has been documented in unpublished reports to funding agencies and professional organizations. Also, the research methods used in these studies are primarily pre/post-test designs using the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1983). This program’s evidence-base could be improved by using other methods to gather results and by gaining empirical validation through publishing its research in peer-reviewed scientific journals. In a review of empirically supported parent training programs, Shriver and Allen (2008) concluded that the NPP should be used with caution due to the lack of empirical evidence-based research. In this review they cited four current programs that they believe are empirically supported parent training programs.

The four parenting programs listed below in Table 1 are recognized by Shriver and Allen to be the programs with the strongest empirical support, and have been extensively researched in well-designed multi-method studies.

**Table 1**

*Empirically Supported Parent Training Programs*

<b>Program name</b>	<b>Program developer(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>
Living With Children	Gerald Paterson	1968
The Incredible Years	Carolyn Webster-Stratton	1984
Helping the Noncompliant Child	Rex Forehand and Robert McMahon	1981
Parent-Child Interaction Therapy	Shelia Eyberg	1982

Shriver and Allen suggest that other parenting programs that are available such as Love and Logic (Fay & Cline, 1977), Common Sense Parenting (Girls & Boys Town, 1991), and the Nurturing Parent Program (Bavolek, 200) are urged to be used with extreme caution due to the lack of empirical validation (Shriver & Allen, 2008).

**Theoretical foundations.** The NPP is founded on the belief that parenting is a learned behavior. Therefore, if parents had experienced violence or neglect growing up, it would not be uncommon that once they become parents, the cycle would continue with their own children. NPP applies various theoretical frameworks in the foundation of the program. The Family System Theory (Constantine, 1986) which states that families are systems and interconnected individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from the system. In the NPP, the involvement of all family members and clearly defining the interrelated elements of the family is crucial to change the family system. That is why parents and children attend this program together, and participation of both parents and other extended family members is greatly encouraged. The program is specifically designed to create a place where all family members can sit down together and actively engage with one another. The involvement of the family system is an essential component of the NPP. This helps everyone in the family to understand the importance and the meaning of the core characteristics of the program.

Empathy is the most important characteristic in the role of nurturance and positive parenting. Empathy enables the construction of a strong attachment in the parent-child relationship (Bavolek S. J., 2000). Healthy attachment and positive parent child relationships set the foundation for future relationships. Attachment Theory developed by Bowlby (1969), places significant importance on the attachment that an infant develops with a primary caregiver in order to develop emotionally and socially. Children who are raised in a supportive, warm environment are more likely to have healthy relationships and have higher levels of empathy than children who are not raised in a warm and nurturing environment (Bavolek S. J., 2000). Healthy open parental attachment correlates with positive relationships in children and

adolescents and gives the opportunity for the construct of empathy to be nurtured (Nosko, et al., 2011).

Just as positive parenting attachment is connected to healthy relationships, negative or low attachment can be linked to unhealthy adolescent relationships (Nosko, et al., 2011). In regard to positive nurturing parenting the single most important personality trait a parent should exhibit is empathy (Bavolek S. J., 2000). Empathy has been the largest measurable deficit when it comes to abusive/ neglectful parenting (Bavolek S. J., 2000). This has been shown repeatedly by the *Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory* which is instrumental in measuring the protective factors related to lower levels of child abuse and neglect (Bavolek S. J., 2000).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory focuses on the quality and context of the child's environment. This complexity may arise as the child's physical and cognitive structures grow and mature. The Ecological Systems Model of human development is the foundation for understanding the parent-child relationship within families that are involved in a complex and diverse social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory broadens our understanding of individual development and focusses on the context of family relationships, and the relationships and interactions with others at the micro-level. It allows professionals to look in depth at the parent child relationship and family relationships and the influence they may have on abusive or neglectful behavior. Specifically, it prompts researchers to study the family dynamics and the role or influence they may have on the entire family unit

Components of Identity and Role Theory (Tajfel, 1986) can also be linked to the theoretical frame work of the Nurturing Parent Program. If a person is abused and/or neglected, a self-identity is formed that makes the individual feel inadequate or de-valued as a human being; therefore he or she imposes the same abuse and neglect on his or her own children. If parents

were abused and neglected growing up they form the role-identity of an abusive adult, they are much more likely to be abusive parents or partners in their adult lives. Likewise, if they were loved and nurtured they are much more likely to fill the role-identity of a loving and nurturing parent (Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010). A child who is loved, nurtured, and cared for is much more likely to carry the role and identity of a loving, nurturing individual into adulthood.

**Protective factors.** To encourage attachment, self-growth, and bonding among the family members the NPP involves the entire family; parents, children, and other extended family members are all encouraged to take part in the program. Including the entire family system can help strengthen the family and promote healthy interaction in a safe and friendly environment. One important component of the NPP program is the parent-child activity time. This is a time when parents and family members can actively engage together in a variety of activities such as artwork, reading, songs, and games. Research has found that creative arts can help facilitate communication and motivate youth to use self-expression in families where traumatic experiences may have occurred (Emerson & Shelton, 2001). This time is intended to promote bonding as well as open communication between family members in a safe and secure environment.

To encourage the use of non-violent discipline methods the NPP helps parents understand the harm of corporal punishment, and encourages empathy. As stated earlier, empathy is the single most important characteristic in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Parents in the NPP learn of their child's specific needs. These needs are put into six different categories referred to as S.P.I.C.E.S: Social, Physical, Intellectual, Creative, Emotional and Spiritual. Along with meeting their child's needs the program encourages and promotes self-care of the

parent's needs. The concept of self-care is vital in order to adequately care for others (Bavolek S. J., 2000).

The program also empowers parents to employ different methods of discipline including behavior management and modification (Bavolek S. J., 2000). This can be done through educating the parent about the harmful nature of corporal punishment and the devastating effects it has on the child. Also, being in a group setting with other parents, it allows for the opportunity to work collectively and discuss and brainstorm different possible disciplinary alternatives to hitting and spanking.

The Nurturing Parent Program (NPP) takes a cognitive behavioral approach to parenting. This is done by helping parents learn new parenting skills and patterns to replace their past learned or abusive patterns through the process of "re-parenting". The concepts of re-parenting are taught by education the participants on the six core protective factors in parenting: Nurturing and attachment, knowledge of parenting, parental knowledge of child and youth development, parental resilience, social connections, and the social and emotional competence of children.

Positive nurturing and healthy attachment are both critical protective factors in preventing child abuse and neglect (Cowen, 2001). Family centered practice in regard to parent training programs is unique because it focuses on family skills training and family activities to help children and parents communicate proficiently, and it provides exposure to social supports (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). However there is very little published research on the actual interaction quality within evidence-based parenting programs that incorporate both parent/guardian and child interactions. Currently there are a handful of programs that include either parent and child activities or a family time. The following parenting education programs include a time when families actively engage with one another: Early Risers- PEAK Family

Nights, Nurturing Parenting Program, and Incredible Years. However, there is very little published guidance on what the content of that time should include to ensure parent participation and optimal engagement. The minimal research that exists on parent/child activity in a parenting program setting is predominantly on Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), which is facilitated by a licensed practicing therapist in a clinical setting. In PCIT parents work with a trained professional and their child in a group setting. This gives parents the opportunity to learn, practice, and master specific skills related to communication and behavior modification (Nieter, et al., 2013). Research has also found that creative art projects with the parent and child can help encourage non-verbal communication, these creative visual experiences enable parents and children to express themselves symbolically with little to no conflict (Emerson & Shelton, 2001)

### **Retention**

In order for a parent training program to be effective, participants must attend, and those attending need to be actively engaged in the class sessions. There can be a variety of reasons why parents may have difficulty committing to weekly attendance. Personal life factors such as mental health problems, low family income, and socioeconomic status have been found to have a moderate influence on parental program attendance (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012). Perceptual and structural barriers can also have an influence on parenting program attendance. These barriers can be experienced separately or combined. Participants may have the perception that the program is too intrusive or is simply not something they need to attend. Structural barriers may include: lack of information of services available, schedule/transportation conflicts, or inconvenient time/location of the program (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012). Other factors associated with poor program attendance may include aspects of course content, delivery method, and overall program design. Clear objectives and well-trained facilitators are essential to keeping the parents coming back each week. Parents who are mandated to attend parenting classes may feel



isolated and may be reluctant to let their guard down. Skilled facilitators need to be able to offer non-judgmental guidance and offer social support to the class participants (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012). Research has found that providing childcare, having dinner available for the families, and having flexible class hours have all increased attendance in parenting classes (McDonald, .,et al, 2012). Providing these things helps reduce some logistical and psychological barriers that many class participants may encounter. Dinner, schedule flexibility, and childcare are all components provided to the NPP participants.

### **Design Logic and Personal Experience**

The Nurturing Parenting Program is used by the state of North Dakota as a primary parent training program with families involved in the child welfare and judicial system. The program operates at multiple sites across the state under a grant provided by the North Dakota Department of Human Services (NDHS). The North Dakota State University Extension Service-Parent Resource Center partners with NDHS by providing training, support and evaluation of the NPP in North Dakota.

I initially began working with the NPP in January of 2008 as an undergraduate intern for the North Dakota State University Extension Office-Parent Resource Center (Cass County). In May of 2008 when my internship had concluded, I was asked to come back in the fall as a children's facilitator for the program. I have since facilitated this class for the last 6 ½ years and have noticed a growing trend in the lack of parent participation during the family activity portion of the class. As a facilitator of this program I have been able to personally observe patterns of the parents' behavior during the class. Prior to conducting my research, as facilitators, after each session we have given a class evaluation of the NPP family activity time for the internal purposes of improving class participation. Through my current research, I have been able to observe the

participants' interactions and behaviors, and I have also had the opportunity to conduct one on one interview with the participants with the purpose of gaining better insight and understanding regarding what type of activities they prefer. This has given me the opportunity to find out some of the reasons why the parents do not want to participate and what efforts we as facilitators of the NPP can do to encourage them so they are more likely to partake in the parent-child activity portion of the class.

In June 2014 I had the opportunity to attend North Dakota's state wide training for all NPP facilitators conducted by Dr. Bavolek. During this time I was able to visit with him regarding my research interest in the NPP. I expressed to him that through my background research I had found that the NPP is one of the very few research based parenting classes available where the parents and children attend together, and have designated class time to interact with one another. He made a very simple and clear analogy regarding NPP. He said that having kids and parents attend together only makes sense; he said you wouldn't and couldn't teach a car mechanics class without having a car present. So it's only logical to teach a parenting class where the children and parents are participating together and engaging with one another in order to have that same type of hands-on experience (S. Bavolek, personal communication, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014).

The purpose of my qualitative study is to implement grounded theory in order to conduct program evaluation of the Nurturing Parent Program's parent-child activity time. The main goal is to look at the patterns of behavior of the adult participants to see what specific factors play a role in making them more likely to engage during this specific portion of the class. I have taken a grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) through observation to come up with my potential research question. Through my observations and data collection I have found

continually that parents are not actively engaged in this time. They often would rather take a cigarette break, play on their phones or socialize with other parents than participate in the “family time” section of the class. The NPP does include a curriculum activity book for family time that we are given as facilitators, but we have flexibility in the activities we choose to do during the class. We are permitted and even encouraged to add new activities to this portion of the class. I have found that when the activities are creative in nature, art oriented and/or hands-on the parents seem to be more likely to engage in the activity time. When the activity includes making something artistic or craft oriented (something that they can take home with them) they are much more likely to participate, than if it is an activity such as singing a song or a game or when they have to verbally communicate in a large group.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching question is why do parents not want to participate in family time and what can be done to encourage adult participation? To develop a better understanding of this and the role the family-time activity plays in the NPP, along with the content of what that time should include to ensure parent participation and optimal engagement, the following questions were explored with participants who were actively enrolled in the class:

What types of activities do parents prefer to ensure that they are actively engaged with their children during family time (parent /child activity)?

What can facilitators do to encourage parents’ engagement during family (parent /child activity) time?

What types of activities do parents not want to participate in during family time?

Do parents who do not have their children present during class feel alienation or awkward during family time?

What can facilitators do to ensure that parents without children present feel included during family time?

What are the parents'/ care givers perceptions of family time and how has it impacted their parenting and time with their children?

## **METHOD**

### **Program**

The NPP program in North Dakota is funded by the Department of Human Services of North Dakota and is a 16-week program held in 10 different locations throughout the state of North Dakota. The program focuses on the specific developmental needs of children and promotes nurturing and healthy family relationships. Parents learn skills in developmentally appropriate activities and expectations, nurturing touch, effective discipline techniques and alternatives to corporal punishment. Children also participate in the program and work directly with trained child- facilitators to promote nurturing behavior. There is a designated time during class where everyone comes together for parent/child activity time known also as family time.

### **Participants**

Trained children's facilitators of the NPP participated in a focus group and adult participants were interviewed to gain a better understanding of the family activity time. Trained facilitators of the NPP were asked to participate in a focus group during the annual statewide conference held in Bismarck in June of 2014. The goal is to have approximately 10 facilitators participate in a 30 minute focus group. Parents who were registered and attended NPP during the fall 2014 session in Fargo, ND were recruited to participate in this study. These participants were interviewed and asked a series of open ended questions. As an incentive to participating in the interview parents were given several age appropriate children's books for their time

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

The collection of qualitative data will be done using two primary methods: individual interviews with parent participants and a focus group of trained NPP facilitators who facilitate classes across the state of North Dakota. The use of multiple sources of evidence (triangulation)

provides corroboration, which in return offers a stronger result of validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

## **Interviews**

Adult NPP participants ( $n = 11$ ) were individually interviewed to gain a better understanding of their perspectives on NPP and family activity time. Interview questions focused on their experiences in NPP overall, as well as the specific activities they enjoyed the least and most in the family activity time (see Appendix for a list of the questions). Of these parents, 7 were mothers and 4 were fathers; 3 attended voluntarily and the rest were court ordered to attend NPP. The sample included 2 married couples and 1 cohabiting couple; the rest were single parents or step-parents attending alone (see Appendix for parent profiles). The answers to these questions were transcribed from the audio-recording, and then analyzed for common themes present. The interviews took place at the Fargo, North Dakota, Nurturing Parenting Program site. The length of the interview varied depending on the participant's personal experiences, and how much they were willing to share. After the participant's responses were transcribed, a copy was presented to the interviewee in an effort to ensure their thoughts and ideas were accurately recorded by the person conducting the interview.

## **Focus group**

The focus group took place at the annual facilitator's training in June, 2014 in Bismarck, North Dakota. The focus group was part of a break-out session specifically for children facilitators of the NPP. The group consisted of 13 trained children's facilitators of the NPP from 9 different sites across North Dakota. They were asked a series of questions about their experiences facilitating NPP and the family activity time in particular. Facilitators that participated all had experience working with children and educational backgrounds in human

development. Also, with exception of 1 facilitator, most had several years of experience facilitating NPP. Questions focused on the activities they found to be most and least engaging, the strategies they used to promote active participation, and how closely they adhered to the NPP curriculum. Responses from the focus group were audio recorded and later transcribed (see the Appendix for full list of all questions). The responses from the focus group were transcribed from the audio-recording, and analyzed for common themes.

### **Analysis**

The methods in this study were based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process entails finding themes in the data. All the data were coded and analyzed by the primary author, with consultation of the second author. The use of multiple sources of evidence (triangulation) provides corroboration, which in return offers stronger validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

### **Ethical permission**

Because there are human participants involved approval from North Dakota State University's Institutional Review Board was sought and all procedures and protocols will be followed. Also because NPP is funded through the North Dakota Department of Human Services, all procedures and protocols have been followed required by their Institutional Review Board as well.

## RESULTS

The themes which emerged from the data collected from the focus group of Children's Facilitators from the North Dakota Nurturing Parenting Program included finding the best order of events and structural issues of the NPP class at their site, participation and engagement of participants, specific family-time activities that have high and low levels of engagement (both supplemental and in the curriculum), and communication issues regarding the participants and the facilitators.

### NPP Class Structure

**Finding the best order of events.** Facilitators were asked to describe a typical night from beginning to end at their Nurturing Parent Program site. All sites reported that they begin with dinner and eating together to simulate family dinner time. The schedule of the night varied after that. One site reported having family time directly after dinner. This change was made to help the children who struggled with separation anxiety from their parents. This way the children and parents only have to separate once during the night. A few other sites also had issues of separation anxiety and have found it works best for them to have family time at the end of the night in order to make sure they have sufficient time to get through that night's lesson.

The last two years we moved it from the middle because the parents were having to separate twice and it was hard to get back into the lesson. So the last couple years we've had it just right before the end of class. We bring the kids down and just do it at the end then the parents have already had their cigarette break so that's one less issue to deal with too (Facilitator).

Over half of the sites reported doing family time in the middle of the class time as the NPP curriculum suggests, and this has seemed to work fine for them.



## **Participation and Engagement**

**Activities with high levels of parent engagement.** Facilitators were also asked what types of activities parents prefer to ensure that they are actively engaged with their children during family time. Site A reported that they try involving the whole family in the planning process of the activity time. Here is an example of a supplemental activity they have found has had both the parents and children actively engaged during family time:

Now, one thing that we did that is really fun, we do it every year now, we do a rodeo and we dress the kids up..... The parents are instructed when they come in the first time, not to pay any attention to their kids. They are on their cell phones..... They don't pay any attention. That's what they are instructed to do and the kids get really..."Mom, Dad, you're not looking at me,"..... and we have somebody timing the whole thing. We do it very officially and then the second times around the parents engage. They clap and they cheer on their kids and then we compare the time. It's stunning how much they improve. It's a fun thing. A real fun thing and they all enjoy it (Facilitator).

Several other facilitators reported using supplemental hands-on activities that were not part of the NPP curriculum. Many of the ideas were found on online through various websites and social media activity boards. All of these activities involve making things together. These types of things seem to keep the parents and the children actively involved during family time and the facilitators reported having great success getting everyone to participate in family time. For example, the facilitators from site B Stated:

I know one thing we did was make dirt pudding with the kids as a family

activity with worms and Oreos and the kids loved that. We do sometimes make improvise with certain activities & with the curriculum. We have also done puppy chow too and it was something they really liked. They can stir it and measure it and get really involved (Facilitator).

Site C also reported having similar success when they incorporated supplemental hands-on activities into the family time portion of class:

We made edible play dough; we did the little kids with older kids. It was kind of like siblings helping each other. They loved it. We made play dough. She was disgusted by it, but they loved it because it looked like more hands on. It was like I can play with it and eat it (Facilitator).

All parent participants who take NPP are encouraged to participate in the Family Activity portion of the class even if their child/ren are not attending class. This gives parents the opportunity to partake in hands on, one-on-one time with their family. It also models structured family-time activities. This allows the parents to be introduced to new ideas that they may be able to incorporate with their children at another time after the class has ended. The majority of the parents enjoyed this part of NPP and described the parent/child portion of the class as a highlight of their evening.

It's fun to learn different types of things to do with my kids and I very much appreciate you giving me the supplies so I can do the things with them at our weekly visits. I can't tell you how much that means to me....it's really great that you do that, and that we can have something fun to do during our visit.

LOVE IT! My daughter's and I favorite part of the class--we look forward to it every week (Parent).

I really enjoy it, I still have some of things I made the 1st time I participated in the class 3 years ago. I like the new projects and being able to take things home and hang them up. It makes me happy to look at the things we have done throughout the class and gives me good memories and I like that she can have things to look back on and have for keepsakes (Parent).

**Strategies for increasing engagement.** Because often time's participation of the family time activity can be low, the facilitators were asked to describe things that they can do to make sure the parents are actively involved with the children and are participating in the family time portion of class. Facilitators described how they give the parents ownership of the time so they have accountability.

Each time, it is one family's assignment to do that. Take ownership and they made up their own games. There were different colors on the floor and candy and dice wherever it would stop there were certain things they had to do. They take more ownership if it is one family and then another family then the other family. That is what we found works (Facilitator).

Facilitators described some of the obstacles and the various distractions that they have noticed that keep the parents from participating in the family time portion of the class and what they have done to deal with these issues:

The first year we did (family time), it was just a smoke break. They were on their cell phones. It was more like we found the instructors were all

with the kids and the parents were separate. So, then the next year, we made sure the parents couldn't leave, couldn't have their cell phones (Facilitator).

**Activities with low engagement.** Facilitators described from their experience and history of doing the family activity time portion of the class, the activities that are listed in the NPP curriculum that the parents have been least likely to participate or engage in. These activities have stood out to the facilitators and they no longer implement them into the program because they have had such poor participation of the parents when doing them.

They would rather paint and color than do the Hokey Pokey. Yes, they don't like to sing, or stand up and sing (Facilitator).

“We have found that too....that parents do not want to sing, the kids are okay with it but the parents do not seem to like it (Facilitator).

The curriculum suggests to do like the hug line thing....that is so weird and people don't like that at all. They feel really uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable for me. I'm not a hugger (Facilitator).

I'm not a hugger. I hate it. New people don't just want to just hug you especially when they are forced to be there. No they are not going to hug you and we do not want to hug them either (Facilitator).

Site D was the only site that did not have Family Time. The facilitators reported having such low attendance and engagement during the family time portion of the class that they stopped doing it all together. They believed the lack of engagement has been due to high staff turnover rates and the lack of facilitator consistency.

We try to get our lesson done first. We don't do Family Time anymore

because of lack of participation (Facilitator).

### **NPP Participants**

Parents who participated in the NPP ( $n = 11$ ) were interviewed about their thoughts and feelings regarding the NPP as well as the Family Activity Time portion of the class. They were also asked to share who they felt had the greatest influence regarding how they learned to parent as well as who they currently look up to and consider a role model. Other themes that emerged were activities that were their favorites and that they least enjoyed; motivational factors for attending NPP class, and things they wished were different.

**Influence on parenting style.** Parents were asked to share who they considered to be their biggest influence or role model regarding how they parent. For most parents, their greatest influence was a female, and was noted as most commonly being either their mother, maternal grandmother, sister or aunt. These were the people who they felt had the greatest positive impact on them regarding how they parent. Other parents listed the community, members of a faith community, entire family, both parents, and TV as their influences.

**Positive outcomes of attending NPP.** Parents described ways that they felt the NPP had specifically helped them. A variety of things were mentioned including: parenting techniques, networking with other parents and learning new information. Most parents felt it had been an encouraging and overall positive experience for them.

Family time activities, they are great ideas of things that I can do with the girls and we can all have fun together. I also have learned that I need to re-learn how to parent regarding discipline like “spare the rod spoil the child” I have been able to back pedal and

learn different ways to discipline them without getting physical  
(Parent).

New techniques on how to be a better parent and family time.

Gives me ideas of stuff to do with the girls (Parent).

I think it has really helped me a lot and I have recommended it to  
my other friends that have kids (Parent).

**What parents liked best about the class.** When asked about some of the specific things they liked most about the NPP class, over half of the participants mentioned that they like that there is a meal provided and that childcare is also included. Participants viewed this as a time that they could relax, not have to worry about cooking dinner, and have adult interaction with other parents as well as learn new parenting skills and techniques.

Dinner, childcare, relaxing, spend time with family (Parent).

Food, open format, flexibility, not locked into a book which makes  
class useful (Parent).

The free food and not having to make dinner; Family time (Parent).

Parents also described some of the activities that they enjoyed the most during family time. The majority of the activities that parents reported as being their favorites consisted of hands-on activities where they are making something together.

Family portrait, painting and crafts...just like spending time  
together (Parent).

Family craft projects, coloring the family picture, the hand print  
turkey and painting. All the Keepsakes I will cherish (Parent).

Making glurch and the Halloween masks...I had a little too much fun doing that (Parent).

**What parents disliked or wished was different.** Parents described getting off topic, and not being able to attend class with their child as things that they wished were different regarding the NPP. In regards to getting of topic this was a common complaint of the parent portion of class and not something that took place during the family time portion of class. Some parents also expressed that it was emotionally difficult to not have their children present with them during family time, but they also appreciated the fact that they were able to learn new activities, and then take those activities with them to their supervised visitations.

I wish my girls were here at class with me; I look forward to class but it hurts to see the other parents doing the activities with their kids and I just wish mine were here too (Parent).

Getting off topic bothers me the most; I would rather have more time to eat so people could visit then and so we could stick to more learning during class time (Parent).

Sometimes we get off topic and there is not a lot of learning time; people start visiting and we get way off subject (Parent).

Because the NPP is 16 week class, the participants often struggle with completing the class and there is an ongoing issue of sustainability. Because of this, parents were asked to describe what motivated them to come back each week. Often the answer was because of a requirement set by social services or the courts to get their children placed back in the home.

My kids and that the fact that social services has required me to take the class and the accountability factor (Parent).

CPS, the food and being around other parents and having someone to talk to (Parent).

Getting my kids back (Parent).

Social interaction, court ordered, having activities already planned out to do with the kids (Parent).

Concluding the parent interview, the parents were asked if there were any additional thoughts or comments they would like to share regarding NPP and their experience. Overall, few negative comments were received. Parents who did share additional information expressed that the class was an overall positive experience and the facilitators created a nonjudgmental learning environment and most said they would recommend the class to their friends and family members.

I think it's a great program and I would recommend it for anyone with kids...when we get our girls back I was even thinking about taking it again (Parent).

I think it's good for any parent to take with their kid...I really like it (Parent).

The people are nice and they don't judge you (Parent).

### **Communication/Information Issues**

**Communication among facilitators.** During the focus group all facilitators collectively agreed that there are significant communication issues on various levels regarding NPP, including a lack of communication among the child facilitators and the adult facilitators regarding what goes on during class.



I think there is a need to have more of a connection between the children and the parents and know more of a history of what is going on in the home because we don't have that either. We don't have any idea what those kids have endured or what they have been exposed to or if it was violence from mom or dad or someone else or sibling violence (Facilitator).

I think, too, it is important for us to know what the parents are sharing in class, to know what the parents are struggling with, and what behaviors the children are doing. That we know the things and issues we need to make sure to thoroughly cover in class.

You have no way of knowing what abuse or neglect the families have endured without that communication. I just feel like we could better serve the kids if we knew more about family's individual history (Facilitator).

**Communication of family history.** Facilitators also commented on the need to have communication with all NPP facilitators regarding participant family history (parents and children) including the various issues which lead to the families being mandated to attend NPP. Another communication and information issue that emerged from the focus group was the topic of children who engage in self harm. Facilitators from at least three different sites said that they had experiences they had encountered regarding children in their NPP group who had opened up to them about hurting themselves. Two facilitators who shared their experience felt that it was something that caught them off guard, and they were not entirely sure how to address it.

You can have some surprises at times. This happened to me while I'm teaching the 10 to 14 year age or so, they were sharing when all of a

sudden we got on the topic of what they do when they feel stressed. How they cut themselves. How they like to see the marks and the blood..... I was almost unprepared. What they were opening up and then they said I'm hurting so much inside that I need to cut so I can show on the outside what I feel on the inside. I am an RN and I have never heard such graphic description (Facilitator).

We had one girl, who attended with her family and they were court ordered because a family member had abused her. So, being at home was so stressful to her. She was so afraid that she would get hurt again. She would hurt herself. She showed me the marks. She had them all over. I just think sometimes you have things in a class that can just shock you. I am just saying sometimes you can have tremendous surprises for the good and for the bad (Facilitator).

Many of the facilitators shared that they had also encountered various behavioral issues from the children's group. There was a unanimous feeling amongst the facilitators that there was a lack of collaboration between the NPP program and the referring agencies. Facilitators had shared that on various occasions they had asked about the family history/ case history, but often if they were given any information at all; it was not given until the class was nearly over or until the session was done. Looking at the issues retrospectively, the behaviors made sense to them after they were informed about the various problems of neglect and/or abuse that the child had been exposed to.

## **DISCUSSION**

The information from the facilitator focus group confirmed distinct issues that all sites struggled with at some points during their NPP course. A very apparent issue for all sites was finding the best order of events in order to make the NPP class the most optimal experience. In regard to what types of activities do parents prefer to ensure that they are actively engaged with their children during family time? Many of the facilitators specifically described activities that they have found to encourage participation. Many of these things were hands on projects that they could do with their children like making a special snack together or doing a craft project. Facilitators have already eliminated the activities that they feel have had lowest participation, such as the hug-line and the hockey-pokey. All of the facilitators who conduct family activity time have utilized the option to bring in other activities and regularly do so. Many of the activities that they listed as having high level of engagement were supplemental and found online.

Other themes that emerged from the focus group included the lack of communication amongst the parent and child facilitators regarding the issues that both the kids and adults were sharing during class time. There was also a lack of communication from the referring agency which mandated them to take the class regarding the participants' circumstances and history. A startling theme that should be noted was the occurrence and prevalence of the child participants sharing that they engaged in self harm. Three different sites had encountered this issue, and two felt that it had caught them off guard.

All facilitators noted having issues at some point with parents interacting with their children for a variety of reasons. Some of these include but were not limited to, being on their phone, taking a smoking break, socializing with other participants. This was addressed by

making the expectations and ground rules upfront regarding cell phone use during family time. Other sites made the parents responsible for the family time activity and rotating the responsibility each week, giving ownership to the family. Several other sites eliminated the possibility altogether of taking a smoke break by having the class with no break time so there was no opportunity to smoke or socialize outside.

The parents who were interviewed were easily able to identify specific activities they enjoyed during family time. The findings from the interviews did confirm the initial observation stated earlier. That being when the activities were creative/hands-on things that they could do with their children on a one-on-one basis those were the ones most often listed by participants as being their favorites. The majority of the parents interviewed said that they enjoyed the class and had overall positive comments regarding the family time portion.

### **Implications/Recommendations**

These findings show that NPP, through current curriculum and structure may not be set up for optimal engagement with the participants, particularly with respect to the parent-child activity time. Facilitators have mutually recognized the need for different and updated approaches and activities, and most facilitators have brought in some type of outside resources to address the shortcomings that they feel are in the curriculum. However, doing this lowers fidelity and makes the program more dependent on the quality of the facilitators. Findings also show according to many parents that the family time portion of NPP is highly anticipated and enjoyed. When this portion of the class is removed from the NPP class altogether it eliminates the opportunity for the important element of parent-child interaction. Family time is specifically designed to create the opportunity for structured, hands-on creative activities that give the

parents and children a chance to utilize the new skills they are building during NPP. Not having the family time component of NPP also alters the fidelity.

It's important to note that parents who cannot attend with their children may initially find it emotionally difficult to participate in the family activity because of their children are not present. Participants who did not have their kids there during family time all genuinely appreciated when they were given the supplies for the family activity to take with them so that they were able to do the activity during their supervised visit at social services. This option is something that should potentially be given to any participant that is there without their child.

As stated previously there is a lack a communication between the children and parent facilitators regarding what is going on in their specific sections of the class. This could be eliminated by requiring all the facilitators to meet after NPP for a short briefing so they are able to address and discuss any concerns or issues that may have been brought up during class or things they may have noticed and deserve special attention. Also, there is a need for better collaboration between the facilitators and agencies involved with the families. There should be a recommendation put in place that social services or the referring agency that mandates attendance at NPP provide the facilitators with a brief family history/background. Things that are extremely important for the facilitators to be informed of include: alleged abuse that took place, type of abuse, status of family reunification, are the children in foster care with family members or foster families, are the children in foster care together, and how often and when do they have visitation. Knowing this information would allow the facilitators to better serve the participants and adjust the class accordingly on a case-by-case basis so each family is able to have an optimal experience.

Other recommendations regarding the facilitators would be to make sure that they are well trained in issues such as family trauma and different types of abuse and self-harm so that they are well equipped to handle any issue they could potentially encounter during the course of the 16 week class. Also, it is important to make sure the facilitators knowledgeable about various resources in the community so they are able to refer families that may be dealing with various issues to the appropriate resources such as counseling, therapy etc.

A copy of the research article along with the recommendations listed above will be shared with the North Dakota NPP Coordinator. This will be done so a there can be a collective effort to improve all NPP sites in the state, and make NPP an optimal experience for all future participants.

**Limitations.** There are a number of limitations of this research project including: the small sample size of parent participants and the data collected from the NPP parent participants consisted of interviews from one 16 week session. To further strengthen the findings a more in-depth look should be taken at a variety of sites and parent interviews from more than one 16 week session.

**Strengths.** There were several noteworthy strengths in this research study. Because the focus group was able to meet during the annual state conference it allowed us to have input from all of the sites that facilitate the NPP in North Dakota. This allowed the focus group to all meet at once with a general ease because most people had met before at other trainings and were very eager to share information. Also, the parent interviews consisted of a wide variety of participants. It is possible that those who were mandated to attend may have an overall different perception of the NPP experience than those who voluntarily attended. The data from both types

of participants showed there were no systematic differences between those who were court ordered to take the class versus those who came to it willingly.

### **Conclusion**

As previously noted the facilitators did all collectively agree that the children's curriculum and many of the activities seem to be outdated. All facilitators have supplemented various activities that they have brought in from outside sources. While doing this does alter the fidelity of the program it also shows that there is need for an updated activities curriculum for NPP to ensure that the parents are actively engaged and that the parents and children are spending time together and enjoying the activity. The current findings have important implications for both further research and development regarding NPP and for current practice in parent education.

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## **APPENDIX A. FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Focus group**

1. Walk me through a typical NPP class, from the moment the parents arrive until they leave.
2. What are some of the activities you do for parent child activity time? Where do you get the ideas for these activities?
3. What do you do as facilitators to make sure all the parents are actively engaged during the parent/child activity?
4. Do you have any specific strategies or ideas that you use to make sure everyone participates during this time?
5. What type of activities have you found to provide the highest level of interaction and engagement among the participants?
6. What type of activities do you feel have the lowest level of interaction and engagement among the participants?
7. Do you ever have issues with the parents not wanting to participate in the activities, and if so how do you handle that?
8. Is it mandatory for everyone in your NPP class to participate in the parent/child activity even if their child or children are not present?
9. What do you think facilitators can do to ensure that people without children present do not feel alienation or awkward during the parent/child activity?
10. Are there any activities that you use during family time that are not included in the curriculum that the parents & children seem to really enjoy?
11. Do you follow the curriculum exactly or do you improvise and add other activities?

12. Are there any specific activities in the curriculum that you feel are not useful or should be updated?

13. Describe the ideal parent child activity. What is it like?

### **Parent Interviews**

1. Who or what was your biggest influence regarding how you parent?
2. Growing up and even today, who do you consider to be your role model?
3. How do you feel the Nurturing Parenting Program has helped you?
4. What do you like about the class?
5. What do you wish was different?
6. What motivates you to come back each week?
7. How do you feel about the parent/child activity portion of the class?
8. What activities have you enjoyed the most?
9. What activities did you least enjoy?
10. Describe your ideal parent child activity. What is it like?
11. Overall tell me about your experiences during the family activity time.

## **APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT LETTER**

**NDSU – North Dakota State University  
Department of Human Development and Family Science  
NDSU Dept. 2615  
PO Box 6050  
Fargo, ND 58108-6050  
NDSU RESEARCH STUDY**

### **Nurturing Parenting Program: A Study of engagement and activities during the parent and child activity time**

Dear Nurturing Parenting Program Participant:

My name is Melissa Dau. I am a graduate student in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at North Dakota State University, and I am conducting a research project on the Nurturing Parenting Program which will specifically look at the activities and the levels of participation and engagement during the family activity time. It is our hope, that with this research, we will learn more about the effectiveness of this time and how to make it an optimal experience for everyone involved.

You are invited to participate in this research study. The only criteria for participating in the study is that you must be 18 years of age or older and be currently a registered participant of the Nurturing Parenting Program. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may change your mind or quit participating at any time, with no penalty; however, your assistance would be greatly appreciated in making this a meaningful study.

It should take about 30 minutes to complete the interview about your perceptions and experiences as a participant of the Nurturing Parenting Program. At the end of the interview, you will be asked for your name and phone number. This information will not be linked with your responses, but will be used for verification to ensure your thoughts and ideas were accurately recorded by the person conducting the interview.

Your identity will not be linked to your interview responses. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study and we will write about the combined information that we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of the study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact me at 218.790.3468, [Melissa.Dau@ndsu.edu](mailto:Melissa.Dau@ndsu.edu) or contact my advisor, Dr. Joel Hektner at 701.231.8269, [Joel.Hektner@ndsu.edu](mailto:Joel.Hektner@ndsu.edu) . If you have questions about the rights of human participants in research, or to report a problem, you may contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program, at (701) 231.8908, toll-free at 1-855-800-6717 or via email at [ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu](mailto:ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu).

Thank you for your participation in this study. If you wish to receive a copy of the research results, please email me at: [Melissa.Dau@ndsu.edu](mailto:Melissa.Dau@ndsu.edu)

## APPENDIX C. PARENT PROFILES

**P1-** Mother voluntarily attending the class with her 8 year old daughter, she had taken the class once 3 years ago and really enjoyed it and wanted to try it again. Is always eager to participate in Family Time and will talk to me afterwards or during Family Time about different ideas she has of activities we could do. Participant really likes the networking aspect of the class and meeting new people. Participant has taken on a mentoring role to P2 and started giving her rides every week to class so she does not have to walk.

**P2-** Mother Court-ordered to take the class, has 2 children ages 4 & 7 that are in foster care with her parents in another city and they do not attend the class with her. Participant is currently in transitional living (halfway house). Very quiet and keeps to herself but has begun to talk more and has developed a positive relationship with P1.

**P3-** Mother Court ordered to take class & is attending with her husband (**P4**). They have 4 children ranging in ages from 1 to 8 years old who are in foster care. The kids have not been able to attend the class with them, but the parents do participate in the family activity. Each week the activity and supplies to do the activity are sent home with the couple so they are able to do them during their weekly supervised visitation at social services with their 4 children. Both parents have a history of substance abuse and domestic violence issues.

**P4-** Father (see P3 for description)

**P5-** Mother Court ordered by Child Protective Services to take the class. Attends with her boyfriend (he declined to participate in interview) whom she has a 4 month old son with (who they have custody of and bring to class). She usually did the family activity time alone (her boyfriend never participates and stayed outside to smokes). Participant has twin two-year old



children currently in foster care with a family friend. The mother has struggled with substance abuse issues for the last several years

**P6-** Mother and father (**P7**) are married in their early thirties and attend class voluntarily and their two children ages 4 & 8. There are no issues regarding social services or CPS. The boys look forward to the class every week and are excited to come; parents have consistently attended class every week since the class started in August 2014. Both parents always actively engage in family time with both children and are eager to see what we are doing each week.

**P7-** Father (see P6 for description)

**P8-** Female in her mid-twenties court ordered to take the class. This is her 2<sup>nd</sup> time taking the class (1<sup>st</sup> time was 3 years ago but she did not complete it). Participant has two children ages 3 and 4. Her oldest child lives out of town and is in the care of her family. Her youngest child is in foster care in town and has been coming to class when the foster parents are able to bring her. Participant has been actively engaged and consistently comes to class.

**P9-** Mother and father (**P10**) in her late twenties Court ordered to attend class, they are not married but have 4 children together ranging in ages from 7 months to 6 years. They currently have custody of the 3 youngest kids and participate weekly with the 3 children. Their oldest child is in foster care and because of the schedule of the foster family is unable to attend, but they do see her several times a week.

**P10-** Father (see P9 for description)

**P11-** Male in his late twenties court ordered to attend due to an altercation with his step-kids. Attends consistently and is very vocal with his thoughts and input. He attends class alone but has participated in the family activity time.