



## The Baby TALK Research Series

*Applied research to inform practice using  
the Baby TALK model*

### Summary Report, 2013

# *Baby TALK's Early Childhood Professional Program Pilot Study: Innovations and Implications for Early Childhood Teacher Training*

Aimee Hilado, Christine Leow , and Ellen Walsh

Funded by the Chicago Public Schools Community Partnership Programs through the  
Ounce of Prevention

This report is available for download on our Web site. To download this report and other Baby TALK, Inc. information, please visit [www.babytalk.org](http://www.babytalk.org).

© Baby TALK, Inc. 2013

## Acknowledgements

### Preferred Citation:

Hilado, A., Leow, C., & Walsh, E. (2013). Baby TALK's Early Childhood Professional Program Pilot Study: Innovations and Implications for Early Childhood Teacher Training. Decatur, IL: *Baby TALK Research Series, Summary Report, 1*.

Date of Publication: April 2013

## Overview

This summary report describes the findings of the *Early Childhood Professionals Program Pilot* study, an innovative teacher-training program implemented with 0-3 Prevention Initiative Center-Based programs in Chicago Public Schools Community Partnership Programs and based on the Baby TALK model. The focus on the training series was enhancing effective parenting skills to support child development. This summary details the process, participant gains, and practice implications for early childhood teacher training.

## Introduction

Educators and researchers alike recognize the importance of early development as it sets the foundation for future development. As more and more children access early childhood center-based programs, there is increased dialogue around supporting development during the critical early years through collaboration with families (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). This collaboration is grounded in the understanding that parents and families play a critical role in a child's development, that information-sharing is critical for supporting children in early childhood programs, and the relationship between programs and parents is mutually beneficial and complementary in supporting development (Ritchie & Willier, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005).

At the heart of parent engagement initiatives in center-based programs, there is a goal to support parents and enhance

positive parenting skills to support child development. Engaging parents in early childhood programs is just one way of supporting a child's developmental agenda since positive outcomes associated with parent involvement in learning environments are well documented in the research (Epstein, 2001). Parent involvement from the early stages of a child's development has been linked to increased pre-literacy skills (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff & Ortiz, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), math achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005), increased student motivation (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005), and increased student engagement and school socialization (Ritchie & Willier, 2008; Sweinhart, 2004). Engaging parents within early childhood settings also has positive effects for the parent. These include better parent-child and parent-school relationships as well as greater parent confidence around parenting skills (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Fantuzzo, Perry & Childs, 2006).

Given this background, Chicago Public Schools Community Partnership Programs through the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Baby TALK, Inc. designed a training format to support early childhood professionals skills around parent engagement and enhancing positive parenting behaviors that can impact early development. The format and outcomes of the training series are described in the following sections.

## Background of the Pilot Study

The *Early Childhood Professionals Program (ECPP)* was developed with the purpose of targeting teachers and teacher assistants who provide center-based services to children age birth to three years; specifically, with a goal of enhancing teacher knowledge around supporting effective parenting skills to support child development. The pilot program was funded with Prevention Initiative funding via the Ounce of Prevention Fund's Training Institute and the Chicago Public Schools' Community Partnership Program, and implemented with a group of their early childhood professionals.

The training program format used several innovative components to meet the program goals including: three months of intensive teacher training in the area of parent education and child development using a combination of monthly seminars, weekly reflective sessions with assignments, onsite teacher observations with coaching, and ongoing participation in early childhood learning communities sponsored by Baby TALK, Inc. Given the novel components built into the pilot training design, evaluative components were embedded through the training process to record participant gains in content knowledge as well as record general experiences in the ECPP sessions.

The ECPP pilot included 19 birth-to-three teachers and teacher assistants in center-based programs ( $n=19$ ) selected by The Ounce of Prevention Fund, the coordinating

entity for 0-3 Center-based training for Prevention Initiative programs in the Community Partnership Program of Chicago Public Schools, in collaboration with Baby TALK, Inc. The participant sample was divided into three groups: (1) Teaching teams from centers in which administrators and/or family support were recently trained in the Baby TALK model, (2) Teaching teams from centers which are effectively using the Baby TALK model, or (3) Teaching teams whose directors want them trained to strengthen their effectiveness with parents and their collaboration with Family Support Services. This sample criterion was used to support professionals who received parenting skills training through the Baby TALK training curriculum and support non-Baby TALK professionals interested in the same content knowledge.

The content in the ECPP program covered a range of content on engaging parents and enhancing parenting skills including: The Baby TALK model core concepts for service delivery, developmental tasks for infants and toddlers, understanding relationships, using opportunity with parents to engage and grow, a review of curriculum to support the parent/child relationship, content on facing difficult issues (e.g. child's development and behavior, parent's behavior, professional behavior), activities that support relationships and literacy, and professional development planning. Then ECPP series was divided into three half-day trainings over three months.

Participants were given a reflective homework assignment after each session that was to be submitted the week before

the onsite coach would visit the participant's program for onsite technical assistance. The reflection assignments were used to frame the onsite technical assistance in addition to being a tool to cultivate self-awareness and support implementation of core concepts from the previous training session. At the end of the last training session and coaching visit, participants received a certificate of completion from the ECPP program and transitioned to the online Baby TALK network of providers for ongoing professional support.

Of the participants ( $n=19$ ), 68.4% had an Associates degree, 15.8% had a Bachelors degree, and 15.8% completed the high school/GED equivalent degree. 90% of the ECPP Pilot participants identified as African American, followed by 5.3 Hispanic and 5% Japanese participants.

## Methods

ECPP participants completed a pre- and post-test survey at the start and end of the training series. The content of these surveys included 5-point rating scales (strongly disagree to strong agree) and fill-in sections for participants to elaborate on the questions presented. These surveys were examined to identify gains in content knowledge and insight into participant experiences with families in their respective programs.

**Data analysis.** The sample size limited the options for quantitative analysis. Using the Wilcoxon test for repeated measures for small samples, the difference was not significantly different at the 0.05 level on the

pre- and post-test although the mean sum before and after the series showed a slight increase. Instead, the data was analyzed using qualitative methods that provided richer feedback on participant experiences. Our analysis took an inductive analytic stance to data analysis in which the written responses on the pre- and post-test surveys were organized into patterns, categories, and themes that were refined into more abstract units of information (Cresswell 2009).

## Results

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the ECPP participant's written responses. In some cases, there was a slight shift in positions between the pre- and post-test survey remarks for participants.

### *Defining the challenging parent.*

Participants defined the "challenging" parent as the caregiver who was unwilling to participate in the program, their child's development, and/or didn't seem interested in learning ways to support their child's development in school or in the home. When asked about the most challenging parts of working with parents, participant remarks included "[parents] not cooperating especially when it comes to their child," "parents act like they don't know what's going on with their child," and "When the parent never has time to talk or participate." These remarks illustrate some of the teacher frustration presented in the surveys wherein teachers wanted to reach out to parents but were sometimes meeting an unwilling partner.

### ***The role of the teacher in addressing student behavior.***

Participants unanimously communicated the importance of sharing both the positive and negative behaviors students exhibited in the classroom with parents on the pre-test survey. One participant wrote-in, “[it is important] so both [teacher and parent] can be on the same page when it comes to their child and giving them the best to offer.” Interestingly, the same question on the post-survey resulted in slightly different remarks. Participants demonstrated greater confidence in their ability to communicate child information – even negative information – with parents and concrete strategies for doing so. For example, one participant said “yes, early childhood educators should know how to talk to parents so problems won’t escalate into something severe.”

Another remarked “some parents are not aware and don’t know the signs or certain delays” thus the role of the teacher was to aid in supporting the child with information and partnerships. Still another shared “both parents and teachers can come together with a plan or strategy to better the behavior.” The post-survey responses showed a growing openness to collaboration with parents in the spirit of supporting the child’s overall development; something that could be attributed to the ECPP elements of homework and reflection, peer support, and onsite coaching.

### ***The role of the teacher in addressing parent behavior.***

This theme encompassed the teacher’s role in working with parents, particularly those who had

challenging parenting behaviors that were not supportive of their child’s development or the relationship-building process with teachers in the classroom. The parent behaviors that were reported as most challenging included parents who did not respect the teacher’s knowledge around their child’s development, the angry parent who was hard to engage, the disengaged parent who does not want to be involved in the classroom, the parent who does not make time to speak with teachers, or the parent with challenging personalities and/or attitudes.

The participant’s scored and fill-in remarks were neutral when discussing the role of engaging parents who were challenging. When asked if the participant would approach a parent about problem behaviors, some participants noted “depends on the parent and how angry they [may] get,” or “maybe not at that moment,” or even “I try not to make a parent angry.” These comments illustrate a common theme that resonated among teachers at the start of the ECPP training series; there was a desire to engage challenging parents but a lack of confidence in knowing how to share news difficult news while maintaining a collaborative relationship.

The tone of the remarks made a slight shift at the end of the ECPP training series, evident in the participant rating scores and write-in comments on the post-test survey. Participants identified with their responsibility to address challenging parent behaviors that may not support their child’s development, as the scores for agreement in this area were higher than in the pre-test

survey. Additionally, participant remarks showed more agency in getting assistance as some noted they would ask their supervisor or consultants for support in working with parents labeled as challenging.

The changing tone for ECPP participants was also evident in how they discussed engaging challenging parents. More respondents stated active listening, patience, building trust, and open communication as effective strategies for aiding parents; content that was included in the ECPP series. Additionally, teachers recognized the parents as experts to a greater degree on the post-test survey with “strong agreement” on questions looking at who had a better understanding of the child’s development (teacher/parent). This shift is a positive indicator of the training concepts being understood, internalized, and implemented in the field.

**Supporting teacher effectiveness with parents.** Participants shared a variety of comments around the most rewarding elements of working with parents. Cumulatively, the most poignant theme was the desire for collaboration with parents in support of the child’s development in school. Participants wanted “positive and trusting relationships” with their parents and increased parent involvement to support positive outcomes for students. There was a desire to have openness and strong communication with parents especially in the case when a child is having problem behaviors in the classroom. Moreover, the ECPP participant remarks highlighted that such a relationship would help teachers feel more appreciated and engaged in the

classroom.

## Discussion

The ECPP qualitative analysis gave way to several take-away messages for early childhood teachers and professional development programs intended to support center-based professionals.

3. *The ECPP training series helped participants gain confidence and concrete strategies for working with parents.* Participants who completed the three-month training indicated increased confidence and competence in engaging parents. This was most evident in the written responses, some of which illustrated greater initiative in engaging families, using techniques like active listening and patience to support challenging parents, and a desire to build relationships that would in turn support children in school.

*Implications* – Training programs that focus on parent engagement and its benefits, coupled with homework with reflective components and onsite coaching, can provide meaningful concrete results that ultimately support the parent-teacher relationship.

2. *The ECPP training series cultivated awareness among teachers around reflective practice.* Participants in the series demonstrated greater awareness of the skills they know and areas of improvement needed, as indicated in the surveys. At the end of the series, participants were better able to

articulate strengths of parents when initially this was challenging. Participants were also able to discuss the goals they had with parents – even challenging parents – in support of overall child development.

*Implications* – Training programs that include reflective components cultivates self-awareness that, in turn, help teacher recognize biases that may undermine relationship-building in the classroom. Access to consistent reflective supervision will be key to ensure self-awareness remains a priority for teachers in the classroom.

3. ***Teachers understand collaboration with parents is key to supporting child development.*** As indicated on the post-test survey, participants were better able to recognize the need for collaboration with parents to ensure positive child outcomes after the training series. In the face of challenging behaviors for both parent and child, participant remarks showed an understanding of the value inherent in parent engagement and the need for open communication with parents. Participants communicated the reward of teaching that is found when both teacher and parent could rejoice in a child's success.

Additionally, there was more comments that emphasized a need to focus on positive communication strategies, relationship building strategies, and parent engagement strategies to support collaborative efforts. The ECPP training series' emphasis on the benefits to both parent

and teacher when there is collaboration appeared to have a positive impact on participants as reflected in their written remarks.

*Implications* – Training programs can reorient teachers to focus on problem-solving versus problem-blaming with parents, which can reenergize teachers and parents in working together to support a child's development.

**Conclusion.** Parent engagement is understood to support early development for young children and the role of the early childhood teacher cannot be underestimated. When teachers need to focus on engaging parents in support of their child in school, teachers must be equipped with the skills to build relationships, to be effective communicators, and to be aware of any biases that could undermine efforts to positively engage parents in the school life of their child. The ECPP training series provided a training format with critical concepts to help focus teachers on the importance of relationships with parents.

The results of the pilot provide a glimpse into how a training program can cultivate self-awareness, confidence, and competence when engaging parents. Replication of the ECPP program and further evaluation can support our understanding of the role of teacher training, parent engagement, and outcomes for children based on parent-teacher relationships.

## References

- Arnold, D.H., Zeljio, A., Doctoroff, G.L., & Ortiz, C. (2008). Parent involvement in preschool: Predictors and the relation of involvement to preliteracy development. *School Psychology Review, 37*(1), 74-90.
- Copple, C. & Bredekamp, S. (Eds.) (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs: Serving children from birth through age 8*. National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, D.C.
- Cresswell, J.W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Epstein, J.L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fantuzzo, J., Perry, M.A., & Childs, S. (2006). Parent satisfaction with educational experiences scale: A multivariate examination of parent satisfaction with early childhood education programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 21*(2), 142-152.
- Gonzalez-DeHass, A.R., Willems, P.P., & Doan Holbein, M.F. (2005). Examining the relationship between parental involvement and student motivation. *Educational Psychology Review, 17*(2), 99-123.
- Hughes, P. & MacNaughton, G. (2000). Consensus, dissensus or community: The politics of parent involvement in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 1*(3), 241-258.
- Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., & Pianta, R. (2005). Family-school communication in pre-school and kindergarten in the context of a relationship-enhancing intervention. *Early Education and Development, 16*(3), 287-316.
- Ritchie, S., & Willer, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Standard 7: Families and standard 8: Community relationships: A guide to the NAEYC early childhood program standards and related accreditation criteria*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Schweinhart, L.J. (2004). *A school administrator's guide to early childhood programs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed*. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Michigan.
- Sheldon, S.B. & Epstein, J.L. (2005). Involvement counts: Family and community partnerships and mathematics achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 98*(4), 196-206.

## *Administration*

**Claudia Quigg, M.Ed.**

*Founding Executive Director*

## *Authors*

**Aimee Hilado (Villalpando), Ph.D.,**

LCSW leads the research initiatives at Baby TALK, Inc. Dr. Hilado is an Assistant Professor at Northeastern Illinois University in the Social Work Department. She has a Ph.D. in Social Work and an M.S. in Applied Child Development, with a specialization in infant and toddler development. Her research interests include child welfare, early childhood mental health, program evaluation, and culturally-sensitive practice with new immigrant populations.

**Christine Leow, Ph.D.** is a Senior Research Associate at Research For Action and serves as the quantitative methodologist for Baby TALK, Inc. She has a Ph.D in Policy Research, Evaluation and Measurement and is also trained as a school psychologist with an M.Ed and Ed.S degree. Her research interests focus on addressing selection bias, using rigorous evidence-based research to inform policy, and specializes in program evaluation within early childhood education settings.

**Ellen Walsh, MA**, joined Baby TALK as the Baby TALK Professional Association (BTPA) Manager in 2011 and leads Baby TALK's Chicago office. She obtained a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Chicago with an emphasis on early childhood. Ms. Walsh is part of the National Baby TALK Training Faculty and brings her professional skills to her work in support of Baby TALK programs and Baby TALK research efforts.

## ***The Baby TALK Research Collaboration***

In January 2010, the Baby TALK Research Collaboration was established to support the organization's mission – to positively impact child development and nurture healthy parent-child relationships during the critical early years – through applied research. The Research Collaboration houses a broad range of evidence-based materials relevant to the Baby TALK model. Research efforts focus on the implementation of the Baby TALK model in various communities, the participants identified and recruited using the model, and specific programs that serve high-risk families with young children. The Collaboration also houses research on child and family outcomes tied to the Baby TALK model, and serves as an informational hub for those interested in relational models for serving vulnerable families.



**Baby TALK, Inc.**  
**500 East Lake Shore Drive**  
**Decatur, IL 62521-3336**