

Teaching parenting skills to mothers can improve the long-term health of high-risk children

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The Bottom Line:

This study demonstrated that teaching parenting skills can have positive long-term effects in children who, because of their parents' social circumstances, are at high risk of developing psychological, emotional, or behavioural problems. This is another example of how very early intervention with at-risk infants can have long term benefits.

What problem is being addressed?

Children who have been physically, emotionally, or psychologically neglected and who have suffered from poor nutrition usually have very poor outcomes as teens and young adults. They may have what is termed "failure to thrive" or growth retardation, meaning that they don't grow or put on weight the way they should. They may not be as intelligent as other children their age and are often unhappy and difficult to soothe. Children who have suffered from malnutrition often are also aggressive, show attention problems, and have poor social relationships as they enter school.

What intervention is being tested?

This study looked at the effectiveness of three different interventions on the long-term emotional and psychological health of children who, because of their social circumstances, were described as small for their age. The interventions included: supplemental feedings; psychosocial stimulation by the mother who was taught to play with her child, to use praise and positive discipline techniques and not to use corporal punishment; and supplemental feedings combined with psychosocial stimulation.

What is the *real scientific* evidence?

This is a follow-up study to a randomized controlled trial conducted with infants and toddlers in Jamaica in 1986-87. Of the original 129 children who entered the study, 103 were tested at 7 and 11 years of age to see how well they had developed psychologically and emotionally over the longer term.

Children who received psychosocial stimulation either alone or in combination with supplemental feedings were much less likely to be depressed, anxious, or to have attention problems. They also had better self esteem compared to children who did not receive stimulation. Nutritional supplementation alone did not seem to have any long-

term effects. For example, children who received only supplemental feeding showed some improvements when tested at age 7 but these had disappeared by age 11.

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The preceding is a summary of:

Walker SP, Change SM, Powell CA, Simonoff E, Grantham-McGregor SM.

Effects of psychosocial stimulation and dietary supplementation in early childhood on psychosocial functioning in late adolescence: follow-up of randomised controlled trial.

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