

prevention BRIEF

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Building the Evidence for **CIRCLE OF PARENTS**[®]
as a Model for Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect
PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS, EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES



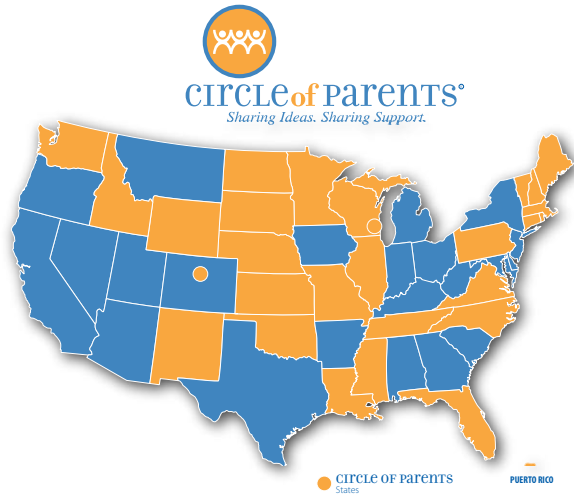
The Ounce of Prevention
Fund of Florida

The Florida Chapter of
Prevent Child Abuse America



HISTORY

CIRCLE OF PARENTS® began in 2000 as a federally funded collaboration between the National Family Support Roundtable and Prevent Child Abuse America. After building a solid infrastructure, **CIRCLE OF PARENTS** was launched as an independent non-profit organization in October 2004. The growing national network includes 29 non-profit organizations, or members, and twelve national parent leaders, which support the formation and continuation of parent support groups in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. **CIRCLE OF PARENTS** continues to partner with Prevent Child Abuse America, the FRIENDS National Resource Center and other national family support organizations to fulfill its mission to prevent child abuse and neglect and strengthen families and communities through mutual self-help parent support programs.



group meetings. The meetings are free, confidential, non-judgmental, led by parents guided by a trained group facilitator, and include developmentally-appropriate children’s programs or child care. ¹

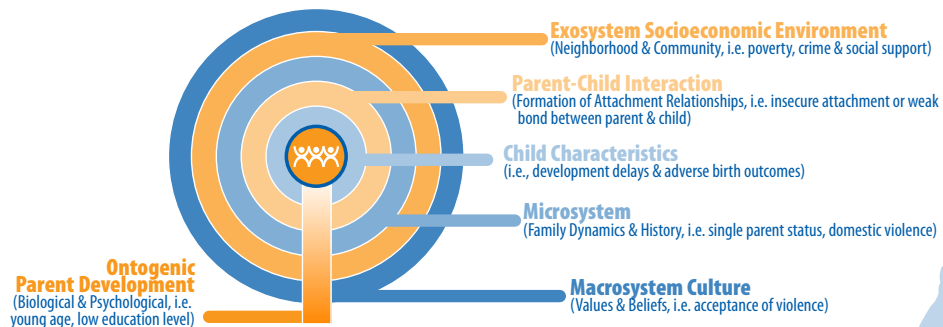
OVERVIEW

CIRCLE OF PARENTS provides opportunities for parents and caregivers to exchange ideas, share information, develop and practice new parenting skills, learn about community resources, and give and receive support during regularly-scheduled

PURPOSE

CIRCLE OF PARENTS is dedicated to using the mutual self-help support group model as a means of strengthening families and communities by building protective factors and minimizing or eliminating the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. While the circumstances that influence a parent or

FIGURE 1: **ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT**





caregiver's ability to provide a nurturing home are complex, most researchers agree that theoretical models used to understand child abuse and neglect should include influences at the child, parent, family, community and societal levels.² One Ecological Model of Child Abuse and Neglect is provided in Figure 1.

Programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect have traditionally focused on individual parents and/or children and their families, while fewer resources have been invested in the intermediate levels that connect families, neighborhoods and communities. The parent support group can be an effective means of connecting families to their neighborhoods and communities, reducing social isolation, a risk factor commonly associated with child abuse and neglect.

The following **CIRCLE OF PARENTS** objectives relate to several known protective factors:

- Reduce isolation, build self-esteem, and reinforce positive parenting
- Expose parents to other families, letting them know that their behavior and their family dynamics are typical, and providing reassurance that the challenges a parent faces are neither unique to his or her family, nor insurmountable
- Improve communication and problem solving skills
- Promote parent leadership and shared leadership within the groups
- Link parents to resources in the community and within the group
- Help parents become more competent and confident in their parenting roles³

PROGRAM VERSATILITY

Parent support groups offer service providers a great deal of flexibility. The groups can be provided as a stand-alone intervention, or successfully adapted

to supplement other child abuse and neglect prevention programs.⁴ The versatility of these groups is demonstrated in their ability to serve parents facing complex challenges, such as caring for children with special needs. Parent support group versatility has also been demonstrated by the initiation of groups to help parents deal with the aftermath of natural disasters, such as hurricanes.

The groups can serve anyone in a parenting or caregiver role, including fathers and grandparents. Though high-risk families are typically the target population in many prevention programs, parent support groups have the potential for universal coverage of the general population.

ECONOMY

After the initiation of a group, parent participants are encouraged to assume leadership roles and the responsibility for the group shifts from a group facilitator to the participants, adding to its value in the benefits to costs comparison.⁵ Parent support groups continue beyond formal program resources and facilitation, adding longevity and strength to their impact on the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Participants' need for continued formal services can decrease over time.

"I'd like to learn how to be a better mother and a better friend. This seems to me like a very good program because you learn and share and listen and also do games and also role play to practice with the family."

FLORIDA CIRCLE OF PARENTS PARTICIPANT

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

To successfully prevent child abuse and neglect, interventions must understand and accommodate





participants' cultural preferences in language and lifestyle.⁶ Mutual self-help support groups embrace the importance of cultural competence and respect. As participants take ownership of the group, they promote respect of their cultural background. In 2005-06, 39 percent of parents participating in parent support groups in Florida were White-Hispanic and 39 percent were African American. During the same year, 46 percent of the parents participating in parent support groups in North Carolina were White-Hispanic and 23 percent were African American.⁷

EVALUATION

While there are significant challenges to evaluating parent support groups, evaluations of the **CIRCLE OF PARENTS** networks in four states have provided information to help us understand who participates in support groups, why they join, and what they gain from the experience.⁸ These evaluations are positioning parent support groups to meet the expectations of funders like the federal Office of Child Abuse and Neglect, known as OCAN. Programs receiving funding designated for Community Based Child Abuse Prevention, known as CBCAP funding, are now required to meet minimum standards for evidence-based and evidence-informed practices.⁹

The following evaluations were examined for this report:

- **FLORIDA CIRCLE OF PARENTS**, initiated by Prevent Child Abuse Florida in partnership with the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida and the State of Florida, Department of Children and Families in March 2004. The evaluation period covered in this report began in 2004 and was conducted by the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida.
- **MINNESOTA CIRCLE OF PARENTS**, initiated by Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota in 2001. The

evaluation period covered in this report began in 2006 and was conducted by an external consultant, Center for Evaluation Research, Inc. and Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota staff.

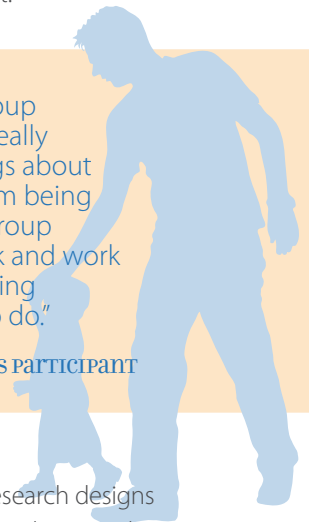
- **NORTH CAROLINA CIRCLE OF PARENTS**, initiated by Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina in 2002. The evaluation period covered in this report began in 2005 and was conducted by external evaluators at North Carolina State University.
- **WASHINGTON CIRCLE OF PARENTS**, initiated by the Parent Trust for Washington Children (PTWC) in 2001. The evaluation period covered by this report began in 1997 and was conducted by an independent research firm, Organizational Research Services.

A primary purpose of these four evaluations was to determine to what degree the support groups were meeting the objectives of **CIRCLE OF PARENTS**. The program evaluations were also needed to document characteristics of the participants, understand why participants joined a parent support group, calculate performance measures required by state contract, and identify areas for program improvement.

"I like the Parent Trust group because I can talk about really important and difficult feelings about parenting and not feel like I am being judged. The Parent Trust group is the only place that I get to talk and work out issues rather than being talked to and told what to do."

WASHINGTON STATE CIRCLE OF PARENTS PARTICIPANT

There were several similarities in the research designs and data collection methodologies used across the states. All data collection was participant self-report through a survey instrument, with three states





using a retrospective pre-test methodology.¹⁰ Major strengths of this method are that it allowed all groups to participate, regardless of parent characteristics, group structure, or number of sessions participants attended.¹¹ This methodology is also relatively inexpensive to implement, is not intrusive, requires a relatively short time to complete, and allows responses to be collected during a single group meeting.¹²

The evaluations included a large number of parent respondents: 188 parents in Florida, 101 parents in Minnesota, 564 parents in Washington, and 89 parents in North Carolina.

The evaluations included more than one measurement domain of skills related to protective factors to prevent child abuse and neglect. The measurement domains were parenting skills, self-management skills, quality of the parent and child interaction, and support system awareness and use of community resources.

FINDINGS

Who Participates in CIRCLE OF PARENTS?

The characteristics of the participants varied across states but, in general, the participants were predominantly female and a little over a third were married. A high percentage of parent support group participants were unemployed or were of low income status.

Groups appeared to be successful in attracting parents at risk of child abuse and neglect to participate.¹³ This was indicated by their previous experience with violence. In Florida's parent support groups, 37 percent of the parents had experience with abuse and neglect in their home when they were growing up. In Minnesota, 74 percent of the participants responded that they grew up in a home in which abuse and domestic violence were present. In North Carolina,

52 percent of the parents in parent support groups indicated they had at least one experience with family violence in their childhood history.

The racial and ethnic distributions are very different across states with Florida having a much higher percentage of White Hispanic and African American participants, which is typical of the state's population.

How Do Parents Hear About These Groups and Why Do They Choose to Participate?

In Florida, the majority (76 percent) of parent support group participants are learning about parent support groups through Healthy Families Florida, a home visiting program proven to prevent child abuse and neglect. The remaining Florida participants indicated they learned about the groups through other parent support group members, friends or family members. In other states, participants indicated they learned about the groups through social workers, friends or family members.

Parents were most likely to report they joined the group due to interest in learning parenting tips and ideas, feeling frustration with parenting young children, and the opportunity to meet other parents with similar concerns.

How Do Parents Benefit from Participating in Support Groups?

Evaluations in all four states found participants improved in multiple domains related to healthy parenting practices and social functioning.¹⁴ Some of these outcomes are illustrated in figures 2 and 3. Three of the four states documented improvements in the parent-child relationship and in parenting skills of participants.

Further, over 90 percent of participants in Florida and North Carolina, the two states that included a Likert



**FLORIDA CIRCLE OF PARENTS:
FY 2004-2005 PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES**

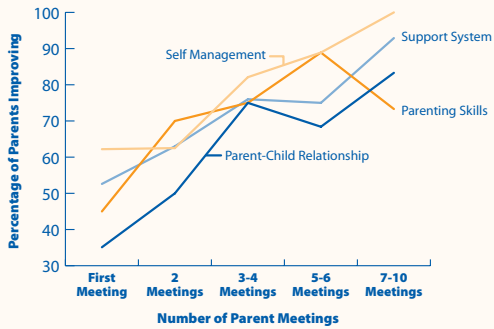


FIGURE 2

scale response to this survey item, reported high levels of satisfaction with their support groups.

It is noteworthy that findings were so consistent across the states given the variety of program structures and the diversity of group participants.

FOR FUTURE STUDY

Despite the progress that was made with the evaluations of parent support groups highlighted here, there were several limitations of the evaluations.¹⁵ First, the data generated in these evaluations were based on a single methodology, self-report, which can be subjective and biased. Second, long-term follow-up is recommended to establish program effectiveness, as none of the states conducted long-term follow-up with the participants. Third, although the primary goal of **CIRCLE OF PARENTS** is prevention of child abuse and neglect, the importance of anonymity among the participating parents made it inappropriate to use measures of verified abuse reports or incidents.

Replication of these evaluations is very important in establishing an evidence base for these support groups.¹⁶ In addition to replication of basic outcomes, future research should focus

**WASHINGTON PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS:
FY 2003-2006 PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

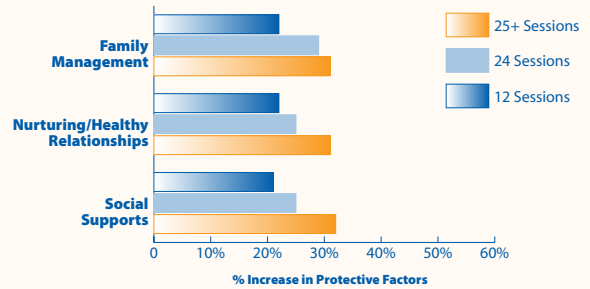


FIGURE 3

on identifying factors that influence participant outcomes. Mixed methods for data collection should also be considered. An appropriate combination of methods might be a parent-self report survey and a series of focus groups, one for parents and one for group facilitators or parent leaders.

As a program to strengthen protective factors for the prevention of child abuse and neglect, the **CIRCLE OF PARENTS** model demonstrates great promise. While the evaluations discussed in this overview represent substantial progress, continued evaluation of these efforts should be funded to improve the ability of groups to address the challenges of preventing child abuse and neglect.

“The adult and children groups allow families to share their experiences. I found joy in the children’s group program that encouraged my children to open up and break the silence of abuse. Without the help of Circle of Parents, the abuse would have continued and the silence would never have been broken.”

MINNESOTA CIRCLE OF PARENTS PARTICIPANT





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"I don't have a lot of outside friends for support. I'm a single mom. I need that group every week. It's more of a help than I thought it would be."

**NORTH CAROLINA
CIRCLE OF PARENTS
PARTICIPANT**





Prevent Child Abuse
Florida



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