

Universal, School-based, Integrated Early Childhood Services: Impact on the Well-Being of Parents and Their Young Children

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Do seamless services improve everyday family life and children's experiences, beyond the direct experience in early childhood programs? There is little academic research on this topic, but survey evidence from TFD1 suggested a high level of "client satisfaction" with the new service array. In TFD2 we systematically studied the impact of integrated services consisting of kindergarten, child care and family support programs on the daily lives of parents and their kindergarten-aged children (Arimura, 2008; Arimura & Corter, 2009; Arimura & Corter, in press; Corter et al., 2009). In particular, the connection between integration and parenting stress was an important area of investigation. Presumably, if seamless programming for children provides cohesiveness in their day and alleviates the work-family tension for families, parents should experience lower levels of daily stress.

Because existing measures of parenting stress focused on major life events or maladaptive parent-child relationships, we developed a new measure that assessed parents' perception of stress arising from *frequently occurring, normative everyday* transactions. Building on Crnic and Greenberg's (1990) conceptualization of *parenting daily hassles*, we developed the Parenting Daily Hassles – Early Childhood Services (PDH-ECS) questionnaire to assess the frequency and intensity of hassles associated with: (1) daily activities and transitions between home-school-child care-work settings; (2) supporting children's learning and development at home; and (3) communicating and interacting with early childhood professionals. These areas were identified as key themes during interviews with parents of kindergarten children. Individual items were developed based on further review of the literature and consultations with experts.

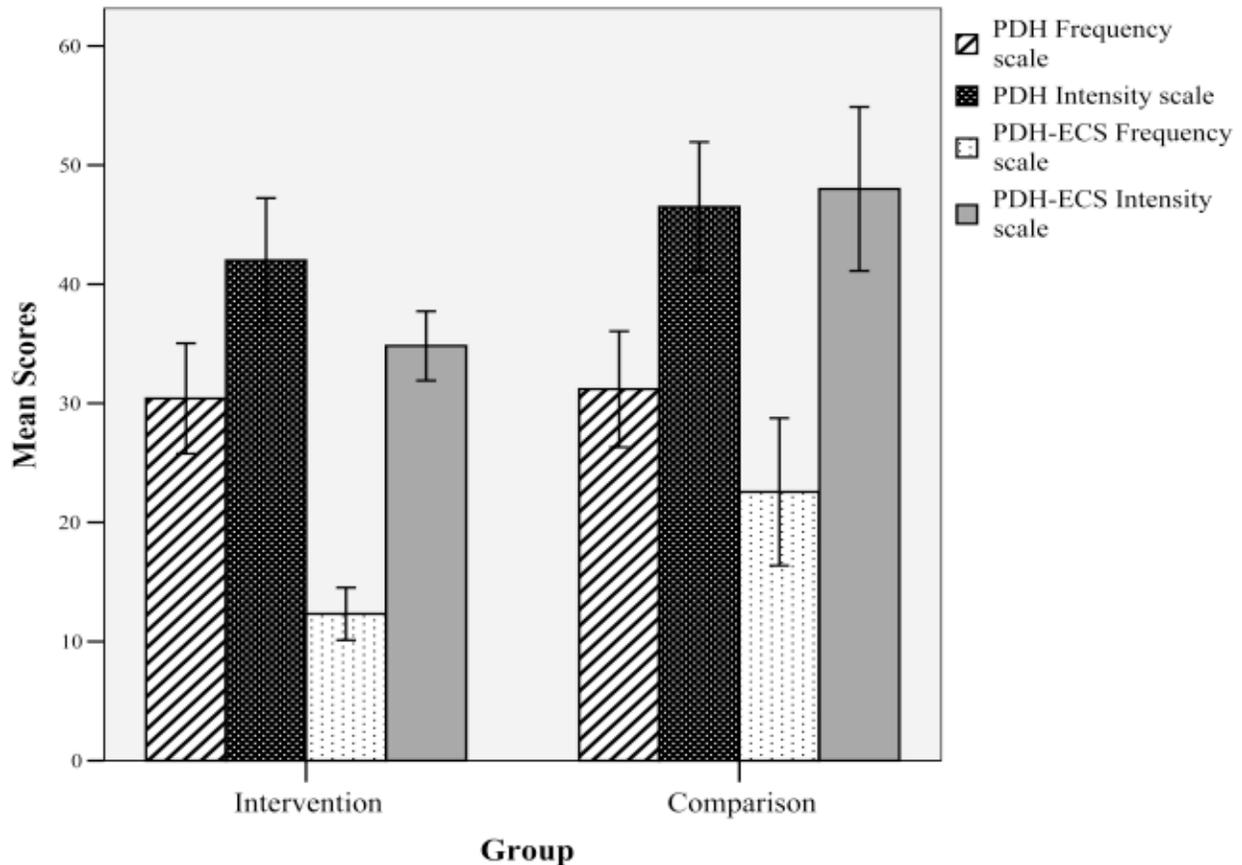
The quasi-experimental design compared the daily experiences of parents and children accessing integrated TFD services *versus* families using traditional, disconnected forms of kindergarten and child care services. Intervention group participants came from two TFD1 sites that offered integrated programming in co-located child care and kindergarten. Comparison group participants were parents and children who attended separate kindergarten and child care programs. Comparison group participants were recruited from sites that matched TFD sites on the TDSB Learning Opportunities Index (TDSB, 2007).

Thirty-eight parents completed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews regarding daily routines, parenting daily hassles, social support networks, and views about early childhood services. Sixteen children participated in a semi-structured interview that involving talking about their daily routines ("Tell me about your day here from the time you leave your home until you go home").

Analyses indicated that compared to TFD parents, parents in the Comparison group reported more frequent and intense Parenting Daily Hassles – Early Childhood Services (PDH-ECS), a new measure developed to assess everyday stress associated with

service use. There were no differences in the general Parenting Daily Hassles scale (PDH; Crnic & Greenberg, 1990) assessing everyday stress associated with typical tasks of parenting and children’s behaviour (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Mean scores for Parenting Daily Hassles (PDH) and Parenting Daily Hassles – Early Childhood Services (PDH-ECS) scales.



Furthermore, integration was associated with the inclusion of school staff in parents’ social network. In TFD sites, parents named both kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators as part of their social support network. In Comparison sites, only early childhood educators were named. These findings suggest that TFD parents had greater social ties with their child’s school, which has important implications for parent involvement and children’s learning. Finally, integration was associated with greater levels of continuity in children’s days. Children in TFD sites spoke about their experiences in a seamless way that did not involve major transitions. In contrast, several children from the Comparison sites noted differences between their experiences at school and at the child care centre (e.g., “We have to learn a lot in kindergarten but we mostly play at daycare”).

This study provided preliminary evidence for the benefits of integrated early childhood services on the well-being of parents and their young children and highlighted important implications for parent involvement. Since the initial development, PDH-ECS

questionnaire has been revised and administered as part of Peel Best Start's evaluation of integration. We are also in the process of developing a study in collaboration with Toronto Best Start Network to examine parenting daily hassles and social support in a larger sample of parents across diverse community contexts.

Reference

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