



# Parent training in the Nurtured Heart Approach: Effects on Parents' Well-being, Practices, and Perception of Child Strengths

Alison L. Brennan, B.A. & Joel M. Hektner, Ph.D.  
North Dakota State University

## Abstract

The Nurtured Heart Approach to parenting (NHA; Glasser & Easley, 2008) is intended for use among families with children experiencing emotional and behavioral problems in the clinical range, but is increasingly being promoted for parents and teachers of any children. Many elements of the approach have strong theoretical and empirical support, yet NHA as a whole remains to be empirically evaluated.

The present study is a quasi-experimental evaluation of NHA using data from 41 five-week NHA parent training courses offered to the general public in a Midwestern U.S. city. A total of 503 parents attended; 326 completed pre and post questionnaires. An information-only comparison group was recruited from the same community. Pre and post questionnaires were completed by 94 comparison participants. Questionnaires included scales measuring parenting confidence and relational frustration, parenting practices, and child interpersonal strengths.

Program parents reported gains in well-being, while control parents remained relatively stable. Trained parents increased in providing positive attention to their child and decreased in yelling, scolding, and responding with negativity. At both baseline and follow-up, parents in the control group perceived more strengths in their children than did program parents, but at follow-up the difference had narrowed by half of a standard deviation. NHA shows promise as a parent training model and its effectiveness should continue to be studied with more rigorous research designs both among parents and in schools.

## Background

The Nurtured Heart Approach to parenting (NHA; Glasser & Easley, 2008) was developed for use with "intense" or "difficult" children—children who are often given formal diagnoses such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Yet NHA is increasingly being promoted for parents and teachers of any children, and is even being implemented in special populations (e.g. autism).

Parents using NHA are trained to minimize attention to undesired behaviors, provide positive attention and praise for compliance with rules, help children be successful by scaffolding and shaping desired behavior, and establish a set of clear rules and consequences. A wealth of anecdotal evidence exists in support of the approach (Glasser, Bowdidge & Bravo, 2007; Glasser & Easley, 2008), and many elements of the approach have strong theoretical and empirical support (see Hektner, Brennan, & Brotherson, in press). Yet NHA as a whole remains to be empirically evaluated.

Although several evidence-based parent training programs exist (e.g. Incredible Years; Webster-Stratton, 1992), some programs without such distinction, such as NHA, are disseminated through the popular press and are used more widely (Barth et al., 2005). One of the key aspects of NHA that may serve to make the approach more accessible is extensive use of a conversational tone, narrative style, and analogy and metaphor to convey key points. Thus, it may be an effective means of packaging and disseminating evidence-based strategies.

The purpose of the present study is to evaluate the effectiveness of NHA in a quasi-experimental pilot study.

## Research Questions

- 1) Is parent training in NHA related to changes in parents' well-being?
- 2) Are changes in parent practices related to participation in NHA training?
- 3) Is parent training in NHA related to changes in parents' perception of their children's social and behavioral well-being?

## Method

### Participants

- Mid-sized Midwestern city, approximately 90% Caucasian
- Over two years, 41 five-week courses were offered for parents
- 503 parents attended; 326 completed pre and post questionnaires
  - Mothers comprised 242 (74%) of the participants
  - Boys were the focus for 213 (65%) of the participants
  - 205 (63%) of the children were between the ages of 4 and 10
- Comparison sample: 92 parents recruited through advertisements in school district newsletters and local newspaper
  - Mothers comprised 82 (89%) of the comparison participants
  - Boys were the focus for 49 (53%)
  - 52 (57%) of the children were between the ages of 4 and 10

### Measures

#### Parent well-being

- 2 scales: Parenting confidence and relational frustration from the Parenting Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ; Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2006)
- Parenting confidence:  $\alpha = .85$  (present study)
- Relational frustration scale:  $\alpha = .90$  (present study)
- Both scales were T-scored relative to national norms

#### Parent practices

- 16 items adapted from The Parent Discipline Scales (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2001)
- Subscale measuring use of positive attention (Present study:  $\alpha = .73$ )
- Subscale measuring use of tangible rewards (Present study:  $\alpha = .84$ )
- Other items meant to measure appropriate and harsh discipline did not cohere, so some of these items were analyzed as separate items

#### Perceptions of child's interpersonal strengths

- Interpersonal strengths scale from the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (BERS2; Epstein, 2004)
- Present study  $\alpha = .93$
- Scoring based on national norms provided by Epstein (2004)
- Standard scores analyzed (percentile ranks also provided in results)

### Procedure

- Identical pre- and post-questionnaires
- Parents in NHA sample completed the pre-questionnaire on paper before beginning the first training session. ID numbers were used to match pre and post questionnaires. The post-questionnaire and feedback form were completed after the final session.
- In the comparison sample, participants completed the pre-questionnaire upon enrollment in the study, either online or on paper by mail. Upon completion, they were e-mailed or mailed a 9-page document outlining the fundamental concepts of NHA. Thus, rather than a no-intervention control, this sample was an information-only control group. Five to six weeks later, the parents were contacted again to complete the post-questionnaire.

### Parent Training

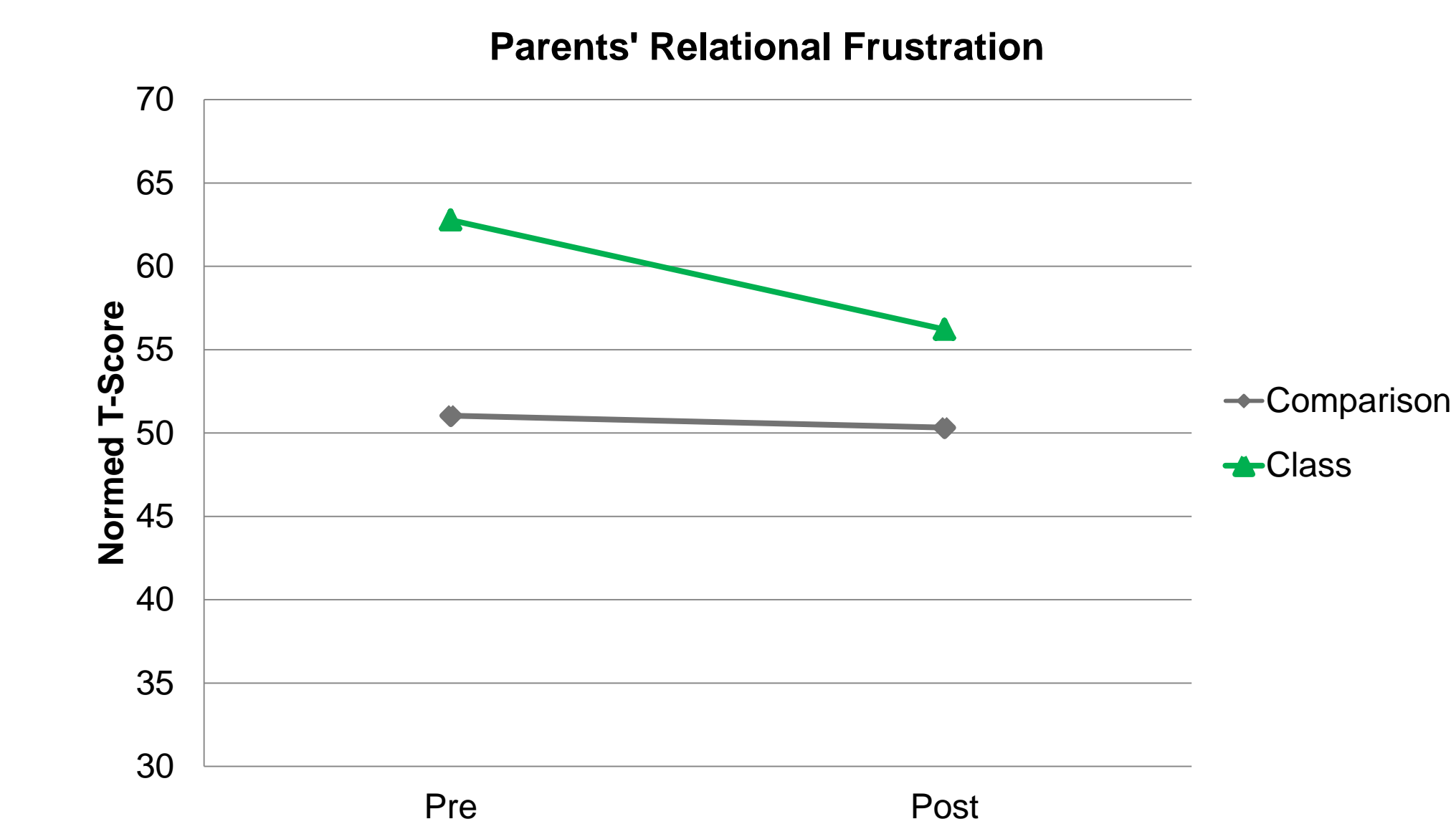
- 7.5 hours of instruction were offered in each 5-week course
- Attendance records were available for 29 (71%) of the 41 courses. Among 367 participants of these 29 courses:
  - 167 (46%) completed 5 sessions
  - 267 (73%) completed 4+ sessions
  - 317 (86%) completed 3+ sessions
- All instructors were NHA Advanced Trainers
- The course included training in all of the components of NHA: refusing to energize negativity, energizing success, and establishing and applying clear rules and consequences
- The NHA workbook by Glasser, Bowdidge, and Bravo (2007) was used as the primary resource for the course.

## Results

### Parent Well-being

#### Relational Frustration

- Parents in program group experienced reduction in relational frustration, while control group remained stable
- Group by time interaction:  $F(1, 389) = 25.37, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$
- Narrowing of mean difference by more than half of a standard deviation



#### Parenting Confidence

- Program parents reported an increase in parenting confidence at follow-up, whereas the mean for the control parents did not change
- Group by time interaction:  $F(1, 392) = 20.76, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$
- Again, the difference between program and comparison parents narrowed by more than half of a standard deviation (See Table 1 for descriptive information)

Table 1  
Descriptive Information and Group by Time Interactions

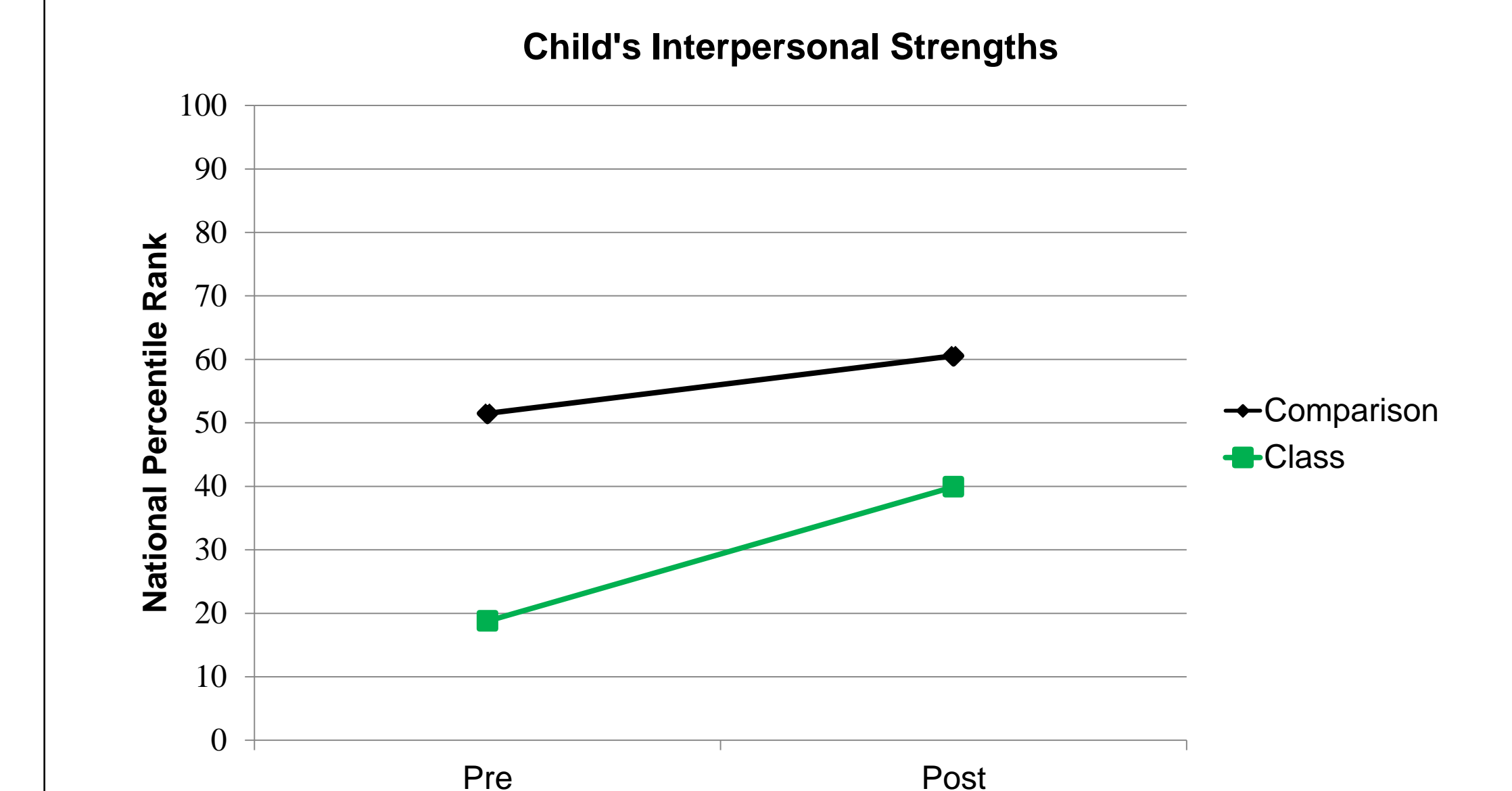
Variable	Program		Control		Interaction		p		
	Baseline	Follow-up	Baseline	Follow-up	M	SD			
PRQ Rel. Frustration	62.77	12.58	56.20	10.14	51.04	11.61	50.32	10.81	<.001
PRQ Confidence	39.20	10.95	45.02	10.81	52.31	10.76	52.46	11.19	<.001
Tangible Reward	2.99	.97	3.28	.94	3.22	.96	3.42	.93	.385
Positive Attention	3.89	.75	4.11	.68	4.46	.57	4.47	.56	.003
Time Out	3.04	1.14	2.94	1.08	2.63	1.23	2.73	1.22	.180
Yell or Scold	2.76	1.16	2.19	1.05	2.71	1.10	2.72	1.00	<.001
Same Negativity	2.03	.98	1.59	.77	1.64	.78	1.58	.73	<.001
IPS Subscale	6.65	2.33	8.97	2.67	10.14	2.98	11.01	2.94	<.001
IPS Percentile	18.68	19.43	39.93	26.81	51.49	29.75	60.56	28.96	<.001

### Parent Practices

- **Use of Tangible Rewards:** No group by time interaction
- **Positive Attention**
  - Program parents increased their use of positive attention
  - Group by time interaction:  $F(1, 414) = 8.70, p = .003, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$
- **Use of time-out:** No group by time interaction
- **Yelling/Scolding**
  - Program parents and control parents did not differ at baseline in their reported frequency of yelling and scolding, but at follow-up the program group reported significantly less yelling and scolding than the control group
  - Group by time interaction:  $F(1, 413) = 21.47, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$
- **Responding with negativity**
  - Though program parents responded with negativity more frequently at baseline, at follow-up there was no difference between groups
  - Group by time interaction:  $F(1, 412) = 11.92, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$

### Child Interpersonal Strengths

- At both time points, children in the control group were rated higher on interpersonal strengths
- Group by time interaction:  $F(1, 403) = 22.50, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$
- Difference narrowed by half of a standard deviation
- Program group moved from a mean 1.12 SD below national normative mean to 0.34 SD below national normative mean



## Discussion

### Summary

- Program parents experienced beneficial changes in their frustration in the parental role as well as in their parenting confidence
- Trained parents increased in providing positive attention to their child and decreased in yelling, scolding, and responding with negativity
- Though parents in the control group perceived more strengths in their children than did program parents at both time points, at follow-up the difference had narrowed by half of a standard deviation
- Changes in parent perception, frustration and confidence likely to translate into improved parent-child relationships and healthier family system

### Strengths

- Comparison group
- Reliable measures (PRQ; BERS2)
- Sample size

### Limitations

- Self report
- Nonrandom
- No fidelity checks

### Future Directions

- Long term follow-up
- Use with average children (Differential sensitivity?)
- Use with special groups (e.g. autism)
- Qualitative data- was collected but not included due to space

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Cass County Extension Parenting Resource Center