

PARENT EFFECTIVENESS TRAINING

Overview of Research and Outcome studies in Australia and the US

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At least seven published Australian studies of Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) have produced evidence-based positive outcomes over a generation for parents taking the course. In addition Christine Wood at the University of Tasmania has recently completed a large investigation which looks at the outcomes from 26 PET courses run by different instructors in six states of Australia. Results from this study have been reported to date at national conferences in Australia from 2000-2005. The work also focuses on the relevance of PET for a radically changed society in which interpersonal skills, emotional training and problem prevention have all been shown to be of crucial importance for parents and their families today.

Outcome Studies (listed by date)

Controlled studies have demonstrated positive attitudinal changes in parents taking PET (Schultz, 1981; Schultz, Nystul & Law, 1980). **Schultz (1981)** showed that PET had positive effects on specific family members, including mothers, fathers and children. Fathers were likely to become less authoritarian, mothers more positive about child-rearing, and children increased their positive relationships with both parents.

Positive attitudinal change was demonstrated in parents after PET by **Schultz, Nystul and Law, (1980)** and matching behavioural changes were shown by **Schultz and Nystul (1980)**. **Schultz and Kahn (1982)** reported that following PET mothers demonstrated improved microskills with their young children in short-term interactions. These included appreciative comments, touching, actively seeking the child's opinion and an ability to manage disagreement.

Rob and Norfor (1980) who compared the outcomes of PET participants with population norms on the same measures found that parents who had completed PET showed greater confidence in their ability as parents, were more aware of the influence of the environment on their children and had a more trusting relationship with them. They also found that those who were not very well informed about child rearing beforehand, improved most after the course, which was taken to indicate that the course was valuable to parents with a lower socio-economic background.

In the US, **Root and Levant (1984)** found that a group of parents from a depressed rural area improved significantly more than controls in attitudes of understanding and trust, and that the improvement was maintained at a six-month follow-up. A meta-analysis (**Cedar, 1985; Cedar & Levant, 1990**) found from the results of 26 separate studies that PET had a positive effect on parents and that it was similarly maintained after six months.

In an Australian study, **Wood and Davidson (1987)** showed that parents acquired new abilities in the communication skills of active listening, non-antagonistic confrontation, problem solving and conflict resolution with their children after taking an eight-week standard PET course. These abilities were significantly greater than those of control parents. The same group of parents and controls was re-assessed seven years later (**Wood & Davidson, 1994/95**) and remained significantly above their initial skill levels in comparison with the control group, at about half the level attained at the posttest. The control group in fact had made very small gains over seven years, still well below statistical significance. It was suggested that the gains made by the experimental group showed the worth of the original PET course, and that the intervention was of value both to the families involved and to the community.

In another study (**Wood & Davidson, 1993**) it was shown that parents and adolescent children taking PET and YET (Youth Effectiveness Training) respectively, acquired the ability to make behavioural changes in their interactions, with both groups demonstrating significant improvement in conflict resolution skills compared with controls. Compared with the control group, the PET parents improved significantly in Assertiveness and Conflict Resolution, with a trend for improvement in Active Listening. The YET teenagers showed a highly significant improvement in Conflict Resolution, although gains on the separate skills of Assertiveness and Active Listening did not reach significance. Nevertheless the study showed that habitual patterns of communication can successfully be changed in a family situation.

Wood and Davidson (2002a) documented qualitative issues regarding problems of child behaviour, parent-child relationships and parent self-management as identified by Australian parents. The child behaviour issues were compared with those for normal children in the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenback & Edelbrock, 1981). The outcomes reported by PET parents regarding their own objectives and their anecdotal reports about them illustrate how PET parents have succeeded in making changes from the traditional role of parent as unilateral decision maker to one which is more adaptive in the vastly different society in which we now have to live – a changed stance which encourages emotional competence and self-control in children, together with collaborative action based on the relationship.

Results are now emerging from the major doctoral study of PET (**Wood, 2003**) which has investigated PET outcomes in 232 parents in six Australian states.

Wood (2003) reported the parenting problems cited by Australian parents involved in an extensive Australian study (see below) and detailed some of the changes in communication, attitudes and behavioural responses made by those who had taken PET. They concluded that the cognitive and structural change in the verbal expression of emotion-related socialisation practices shown by these parents points to the contemporary relevance of PET.

Wood and Davidson (2003) documented linguistic changes made by parents after PET training and showed how these reflected not only attitudinal shifts towards a more collaborative style of parenting, but also demonstrated the positive communication patterns found in strong families.

Davidson and Wood (2004) in an experimental investigation of the Conflict Resolution Model of Littlefield, Love, Peck and Wertheim (1993) included results from collaborative research into the model and into PET conflict resolution, which utilises both listening and assertive skills as part of creative problem solving.

(*Theory into Practice* is a scholarly journal published quarterly by the Ohio State University College of Education. Guest edited by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, the articles place the research on national and international conflict resolution and peer mediation in the context of other factors that influence the program's success. Conflict resolution and peer mediation is the theme of the winter issue).

Wood, C. D., & Davidson, J. A. (2004). Factors affecting the acquisition of skills in PET (Parent Effectiveness Training): Language, gender and education. In T. Bowles (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Australian Psychological Society's Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 4th Annual Conference: Relationship transitions* (pp.141 - 144). Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.

Wood, C. D., & Davidson, J. A. (2005). Relationship and control: Theory and practice in PET and Triple P. Paper presented as part of a symposium on parenting and attachment at the 40th Annual Conference of the APS. Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.

Wood, C. D., & Davidson, J. A. (2005, in press). Minding our language: Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) Australian Style. In T. Bowles (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Australian Psychological Society's Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 5th Annual Conference: The good, the bad and the ugly*. Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.

APS poster presentations
Abstracts only

In one investigation reported at the 35th APS Conference in Canberra (**Wood & Davidson, 2000**) comparing 151 PET participants and 81 controls it was found that the PET parents showed significant improvement compared to the control group in the acquisition of the major PET skills of listening and appropriate confrontation, and in the resolution of conflict.

Wood and Davidson (2001, 2002b) showed that parents who had been trained in the PET skills of empathic listening, non-antagonistic assertiveness and family conflict resolution showed significantly reduced stress about their own parenting issues in comparison with controls.

Major Study of PET

How We Talk to Our Children: An Evaluation of Parent Effectiveness Training For Emotional Competence (Wood, 2003)

Background

Studies in empathic listening (Ickes, 1997), emotional intelligence (Bar-On 2000, 2001) and conflict resolution (Sanson & Bretherton, 2001; Alvy, 1994) point to the importance of parent training for bringing up socially competent children in a world so changed in western countries that traditional parenting practices are not always effective. Both children's behaviour and their ability to manage emotion can be affected by interactions with the parent in infancy (Fischer & Rose, 1994) childhood and adolescence (Gottman, 1997). Appropriate assertiveness is an important component of communication skill (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). Conflict resolution skills require a combination of empathic listening, assertiveness and creative problem solving (Littlefield, Love, Peck & Wertheim, 1993).

Extensive Australian Outcome Study

Parent Effectiveness Training (PET, Gordon, 1976) focuses attention on the development of empathic family relationships leading to autonomy and self-responsibility in children through parent training in empathic listening, appropriate assertiveness and conflict resolution. PET reaches about 900 parents annually around Australia, using a recently developed workbook (Wood, 1997) simplified without loss of content as part of this study. This investigation provides an extensive study of PET in 6 states of Australia comparing three groups of parents (70 using the standard US workbook, 81 using the Australian workbook and 81 controls with no PET). The study compares parents' pretest and posttest results with outcome measures following a PET program. Verbal and cognitive skills acquisition was measured using the Parent-Child Response Sheet (PCRS, Wood & Davidson, 1987, 1994/95). Parents' family management concerns were collected through the parents' own lists of children's unacceptable behaviours and the Issues of Parental Concern (IPC, Gordon, 1976; Wood, 1996) including ratings of the stress they felt about each issue on the SUDS scale (Wolpe, 1990) before and after PET.

Results

Both PET groups achieved substantially and significantly higher scores than controls on empathic listening, appropriate assertiveness and conflict resolution as measured by the PCRS. Compared with controls the PET parents showed a significantly greater reduction in levels of parental stress about their family concerns. Males scored significantly higher in listening skills using the Australian version, although there were no statistically significant differences between the workbooks. Extensive qualitative reports indicated that parents had made satisfactory changes in family management procedures, improved relationships with children and increased levels of family harmony. These findings confirm the conclusions of earlier research, including the meta-analysis of PET studies (Cedar & Levant, 1990), and provide the first extensive evaluation of PET implemented at a community level in the light of emerging awareness of emotional intelligence and the need for family development of interpersonal communication skills.

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