

Spare The Rod And Save The Child: Positive Parenting Technique Reduces Maltreatment

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It's a common sight: a toddler throwing a tantrum in the grocery store. But what's the best approach, if you are the toddler's parent? Ignoring the meltdown? Taking the child out of the store? Or the traditional method: a good spanking?

Researchers at [The University of Queensland](#) have the answer to this and many other parenting challenges. They have bundled the answers into a system called [Triple P](#) — the Positive Parenting Program — and licensed it to organizations and practitioners around the world.

As a result, thousands of parents are learning how to improve their relationships with their children. What's more, Triple P is helping to prevent child maltreatment.

Child Maltreatment and Triple P

Child maltreatment — abuse or neglect — poses a major public-health problem around the world. The psychological damage goes beyond just one child, and that cycle often repeats itself from one generation to another.

Maltreatment also brings with it a financial burden. Groups such as [Prevent Child Abuse America](#) estimate the cost to U.S. society in the billions of dollars.

Triple P offers a way to end the cycle of violence and neglect. Researchers designed the program to help parents manage their children's behavior through techniques such as the following:

- Promoting positive relationships
- Encouraging desirable behavior
- Teaching children new skills

“*Research shows that families who use Triple P have better parent-child relationships and fewer incidents of child maltreatment than families who don't.*”

In 2009, the journal *Prevention Science* published a [study](#) involving 18 counties in the southeastern United States. Half of the counties trained service providers (social workers, teachers and doctors) on Triple P. The other nine counties did not.

In the counties using Triple P, rates of child maltreatment either went down or stayed the same, while those rates rose in counties not using Triple P.

Triple P's Growing Pains

Matt Sanders, Ph.D., is professor of clinical psychology and director of the [Parenting and Family Support Centre](#) at The University of Queensland in Queensland, Australia. The idea for Triple P came to him in 1978, during his doctoral research.

He first focused on helping parents manage aggressive children using home-based interventions. But he soon realized that spreading the word about the program, home by home, would not reach enough families to save at-risk children. So he decided to approach the problem via a public-health model.

Sanders had funded his early research thanks to various government bodies and philanthropic organizations. But he needed steady funding to employ a public-health model to spread the word about the program.

Enter Desmond “Des” McWilliam. McWilliam had been a news director and news anchor at an Australian TV station. In 1993, after his second child was born, he was looking for a new challenge.

A colleague referred McWilliam to Sanders. During one of their meetings, Sanders showed McWilliam some videotape of parents using Triple P and explained his vision of reaching parents through a public-health model.

“I saw this vision and I thought, “This is an absolute winner,” McWilliam recalls.

Sanders wanted McWilliam's help in creating four teaching videos about Triple P. However, he didn't have enough money to produce those videos.

“I thought, “This is really important to do, and this is something all parents would be interested in,” McWilliam says.

So the former anchorman dipped into his personal savings and financed the videos himself.

University Takes Baby Steps in Licensing Social Science Technology

By 1999, Triple P had outgrown The University of Queensland's ability to manage Triple P's training, publications and marketing. When the university approached McWilliam about licensing the program, its research commercialization company, [UniQuest Pty Limited](#), got involved.

“The reason we decided to license Triple P was to make the program grow, making it more widely disseminated,” says Joe McLean, UniQuest's group manager, social sciences and humanities.

However, a social science program posed a new set of challenges for UniQuest.

For one thing, the university's policy on intellectual property was clear on patents but less so on licensing training programs. So UniQuest needed to make sure its actions fit the university's policy.

In addition, most funding — from the university and elsewhere — was pegged for new ventures and geared toward technology. Triple P was neither new nor a conventional type of technology, such as an engineering invention.

However, UniQuest overcame these challenges and licensed the technology to a private company that would become known as Triple P International Pty Ltd, with McWilliam as managing director. Luckily McWilliam was able to help fund the company's growth, in addition to managing the Brisbane, Australia-based firm.

Going Beyond "Supernanny"

With its public-health model, Triple P International started reaching parents through agreements with government agencies, private organizations and various practitioners.

The company trained practitioners in the program to target it to parents, schools, doctors and social workers. It marketed the program to the general public by using mass media such as newspaper articles. Triple P also made its way into thousands of homes with a New Zealand TV show called “Families” in 1995, as well as a British TV show called “[Driving Mum and Dad Mad](#)” in 2005. ([View clips](#) of the program on the Triple P website.)

Triple P: for Every Parent

TV programs such as “Driving Mum and Dad Mad” have helped to dispel the myth that only poor parents maltreat their children. In fact, researcher Adrea Theodore, M.D., M.P.H., led an eye-opening study published in the journal *Pediatrics* that revealed that the rate of harsh physical discipline was not significantly different between low- and high-income households.

However, governments concentrate their interventions on only about 15 percent of the population: those at the greatest risk. This means 85 percent of families don't get the help they might need.

“Everyone, at some point, needs parenting support,” says Sanders.

To that end, Sanders has developed different versions of Triple P for different situations. There are versions for parents of a variety of children, including children with behavior difficulties or autism.

The tiered model allows parents to try different levels of involvement, ranging from watching a TV program to participating in face-to-face counseling sessions.

Sanders and McWilliams hope that, someday, every parent will receive Triple P training. They would like to remove the stigma of parenting classes so that Triple P isn't seen as a program just for “bad” parents.

Triple P Comes of Age

Over the course of Triple P's development, McWilliam's own two children have grown into adults and Sanders is now a grandfather. These days Triple P is used around the globe, and Triple P International is testing a Web-based version of its training program so practitioners can achieve accreditation online.

When asked to predict what will happen in the next five to 10 years, McLean says he sees the international market for Triple P growing. More and more governments are demanding comprehensive, evidence-based solutions, he adds.

As for the best solution when a child is throwing a tantrum at a store, Sanders advises parents to praise good behavior, involve children in the shopping experience and reward kids after a tantrum-free trip.

In other words, using the building blocks of positivity and praise will lead to happier parents and better-behaved children. Unlike the old adage, sparing the rod will not spoil the child. It could very well save him.

This story was originally published in 2012.

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