



# RESEARCH PROFILE

N U M B E R 1

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## INTRODUCTION

*Child maltreatment is an extremely serious social problem, with high costs and severe lifelong consequences for children and families. More than one million children are abused and neglected annually, at a rate of 23 per 1,000 (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). The annual monetary costs are \$9 billion, at minimum, for child welfare, health care, and out-of-home care. Related costs for services such as emergency room treatment, special education, and family preservation increase this figure significantly (National Child Abuse Coalition, 1999). The impact of child maltreatment extends far beyond the family, affecting a broad array of significant social problems and needs, including crime, delinquency, health, mental health, education, substance abuse, and child welfare.*

## PARENTS ANONYMOUS® STRENGTHENS FAMILIES

Parents Anonymous® Inc. was founded in 1969 as the first child abuse prevention and treatment program in the United States. A courageous mother seeking help to create a safe and caring home for her family partnered with her social worker to launch a national movement to bring help, support, strength, and hope to millions of families all across America. Their vision inspired thousands of parents, professionals, and community volunteers to establish Parents Anonymous® groups throughout the United States. Parents Anonymous® Inc. remains the nation's oldest child abuse prevention organization dedicated to strengthening families through innovative strategies that promote mutual support and parent leadership.

As the nation's premier family strengthening program, Parents Anonymous® encourages parents to ask for help early, whatever their circumstances, in order to effectively break the cycle of abuse by strengthening parents and ensuring that children live and grow in safe, nurturing homes with hope for the future. Parents Anonymous® has benefited more than a generation of families of all social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, and has touched the lives of millions by partnering with communities and involving volunteers, agencies, and parents seeking help.

The uniqueness of Parents Anonymous® is embedded in its shared leadership-mutual support model, which builds on the strengths of parents in their families and communities. Parents Anonymous® simultaneously eliminates risk factors such as unrealistic expectations, destructive attitudes, and harmful behaviors, while enhancing protective factors such as increased self-esteem, increased competencies, and provision of a nurturing environment for parents and their children (Pion-Berlin, 1999). This twofold approach has been identified as the most effective strategy for the prevention of child maltreatment (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998; National Research Council, 1993). In addition, Parents Anonymous® addresses the enhancement of the five major types of family protective factors:

- Supportive parent-child relationships.
- Positive discipline methods.
- Monitoring and supervision.
- Families who advocate for their children.
- Parent who seek information and support.

(Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998; p. 3)

## PARENTS ANONYMOUS® PREVENTS AND TREATS CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

National research definitively confirms the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® in diminishing the impact of risk factors while dramatically increasing the resiliency of parents and children, resulting in the prevention of child abuse and neglect (Behavior Associates, 1976; Cohn, 1979). Studies of mutual support and shared leadership indicate that the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® can be attributed to its shared leadership-mutual support approach, where confidentiality is assured and parents can discuss their problems in a reciprocally supportive, nonjudgmental setting (Blizinsky, 1982; Levine, 1988; Nix, 1980; Reissman & Carroll, 1995; Thompson, 1994, 1995; and Yoak & Chesler, 1985).

The first national study of Parents Anonymous® clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of the Parents Anonymous® program (Behavior Associates, 1976). Study results showed a significant and immediate reduction in physical abuse. Verbal abuse also declined immediately and continued to decline over time. Other significant changes in Parents Anonymous® parents included increased self-esteem, decreased social isolation, and enhanced knowledge of child development, resulting in more appropriate behavioral expectations of their children (Lieber & Baker, 1997).

In a separate investigation, Berkeley Planning Associates (1977) confirmed the positive findings of Behavior Associates (1976). The Berkeley Planning Associates' national evaluation study was conducted to determine the relative effectiveness of different treatment strategies for parents, including Parents Anonymous®, individual counseling, case management, lay counseling, group therapy, and parent education. A major conclusion of the study was that "...parents who participated in Parents Anonymous®, irrespective of whatever other services they received, were significantly more likely to have their problems resolved than clients who did not participate in this service" (Cohn, 1979, p. 495).

The effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® has also been demonstrated by other researchers who reported improvements in parents' self-esteem, ability to cope with stress, knowledge of child development, and problem-solving ability, as well as decreases in parents' abusive behaviors, impulsiveness, inappropriate expectations of themselves and their children, and social isolation (Alexander, 1980; Borman and Lieber, 1984; Hunka, O'Toole, and O'Toole, 1985; Savells and Bash, 1979). In additional studies, Parents Anonymous® parents described the Parents Anonymous® model as relevant, supportive, accessible, and non-threatening, which contributed to their ability to solve their parent-child relationship problems (Powell, 1979, 1981).

Furthermore, national research of Parents Anonymous® original children's programs revealed significant improvements in children's self-esteem,

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behavior, and social interaction skills (Behavior Associates, 1983, 1984). The study concluded that these children reduced their lying, decreased their physical aggressiveness, and were better able to concentrate.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the U.S. Department of Justice funded a new national outcome study to assess the effectiveness of Parents Anonymous® in preventing and treating child abuse and neglect. A research team from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), Oakland, California, is conducting this groundbreaking study. The process evaluation, completed in 2002, clarified operational definitions of Parents Anonymous® Group Standards and set the stage for the outcome evaluation phase of the study.

Because of its demonstrated effectiveness, Parents Anonymous® was highlighted by Congress in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1996) as the benchmark for child abuse prevention and treatment programs throughout the United States. Moreover, OJJDP acknowledges and promotes Parents Anonymous® as a national Model Family Strengthening Program to prevent juvenile delinquency. The first publication in OJJDP's family Strengthening Series was on Parents Anonymous® and highlights the critical linkages between Parents Anonymous® and juvenile delinquency prevention efforts (Rafael & Pion-Berlin, 1999).

## PARENTS ANONYMOUS® IMPACTS OTHER SOCIAL PROBLEMS

As Parents Anonymous® strengthens families by preventing and treating child abuse, it also decreases the potential for other social problems to



occur. It is well-documented that children who are abused and neglected are at higher risk for a number of interrelated social problems, including juvenile delinquency, crime, emotional and developmental problems, substance abuse, poor academic performance, homelessness, and unemployment, each of which has enormous monetary and social costs (CWLA National Data Analysis System; Jacobson, 1999; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998; The National League of Cities et al., 1999; Widom, 1992).

### Parents Anonymous® Prevents Juvenile Delinquency and Crime

Research has overwhelmingly established that being abused or neglected as a child increases one's risk for delinquency, adult criminal behavior, and violent criminal behavior (Widom 1992; Stewart, et al., 2002). In addition, children who are abused or neglected are at a higher risk for committing crimes at younger ages and being arrested more frequently than nonabused children (Widom, 1989, 1992, 1996). In fact, a history of child maltreatment has been found to increase the

chances of youth violence by 24% (Thornberry, 1994), and increase the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53%, as an adult by 38%, and for violent crime by 38% (Widom, 1992). Findings reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (1999) noted that 19% of State prison inmates, 10% of Federal inmates, and 16% of those in local jails or on active probation had been physically or sexually abused before their current sentence. Significant relationships have been found between the prevalence of child maltreatment and negative outcomes during adolescence such as serious delinquency, violence, pregnancy, drug use, and mental health problems as well as lower school performance (Kelly, Thornberry, & Smith, 1997; Stewart et al., 2002).

The prevention of child abuse and neglect can result in reducing juvenile delinquency, reducing the number of teenagers who run away, deterring adolescent drug and alcohol addiction, and helping young people avoid the traps of prostitution and pornography (National Child Abuse Coalition, 1999). Deterring one young adult from a violent criminal career can save society an estimated \$1.1 million (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998).

### Parents Anonymous® Treats Emotional and Developmental Problems

Being abused or neglected as a child results in behavioral and emotional problems, including feelings of helplessness, terror, isolation, guilt and grief. When these children become adults, they experience increased rates of suicide attempts and are at high risk for antisocial personality, alcoholism, and prostitution (Office for Victims of Crime, 1999; Widom, 1996).



Neurobiological studies highlight the importance of positive parent-child interactions during the first three years of life which further support the need for early intervention programs to prevent child maltreatment, juvenile delinquency and other social problems (*Newsweek*, 1997; Siegel, 1999). In this special edition of *Newsweek*, Parents Anonymous® was the only direct service program highlighted as a resource for parents, in contrast to the other Web sites and information services listed.

For very young children, it has been found that traumatic experiences of abuse or neglect at the beginning of life have profound negative effects on the parts of the brain that are responsible for basic regulatory capacities and response to stress (Siegel, 1999). In addition, the legacy of child maltreatment is seen starkly in the population of disabled adults where an estimated 25% became disabled as a result of child abuse and neglect (Kilpatrick & Sanders, 1997).

### Parents Anonymous® Deters Substance Abuse

A study of children in Grades 6, 9, and 12 demonstrated that children who had been abused were not only more likely to use alcohol, marijuana, and almost all other drugs, but also

more likely to use multiple substances at a younger age. These children reported that they used substances in order to cope with their painful emotions and to escape from their personal problems (Harrison, Fulkerson, and Beebe, 1997).

## Parents Anonymous® Enhances School Performance

Numerous studies have demonstrated that students who are abused or neglected are at significant risk for poor academic performance, grade repetition, and discipline problems (Eckenrode et al., 1993; Reyome, 1993). Furthermore, when even one young person leaves high school for a life of crime and drug abuse, the cost to society is \$1.7-\$2.3 million (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999).

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strategy for decreasing child maltreatment and thus decreasing the negative social consequences of child abuse and neglect. By starting with families as early as possible to improve parenting practices and provide parental support, family strengthening programs can curb delinquency and crime, reduce problem behaviors in school and elsewhere, prevent drug use, decrease family conflict, and strengthen communities (American Psychological Association, 1996; King et al., 1992; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998; Mayer, 1995). Based on nationally-established criteria, Parents Anonymous® is a highly effective family strengthening program because it is comprehensive, flexible, responsive, family-focused, community-based, encourages mutual respect and trust, and has a clear mission with high standards of quality and good management (Schorr, 1997).

## Parents Anonymous® Prevents Homelessness and Unemployment

Abused children often end up in foster care. Of the 25,000 to 30,000 young people who become of age and leave foster care each year, 25-40% experience homelessness and less than one half of them have jobs within one year (Cook, 1992). Compared to the general population, adults who were in foster care as children report less educational, employment, and income achievement (Benedict and Zuravin, 1996).

## CONCLUSIONS

Family strengthening has been identified by prominent researchers as the most effective

Parents Anonymous® programs effectively prevent child abuse and neglect, thereby eliminating the estimated direct and indirect costs of \$94 billion annually to our society (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2001). Through prevention, Parents Anonymous® decreases child maltreatment as a risk factor that can escalate into other costly social problems such as juvenile delinquency, crime, emotional and developmental problems, substance abuse, poor school performance, homelessness, and unemployment. Investing in Parents Anonymous® not only saves society millions of dollars annually by deterring the tremendous emotional and social consequences of child abuse, it also saves the lives of millions of America's children and assures strong families for the next generation.

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