



Feasibility and Acceptability of Parenting for Lifelong Health Program in Mainland China

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Background

Child maltreatment is a widespread public health problem affecting the health and well-being of children worldwide. Previous Chinese studies estimated the prevalence of child physical abuse in China at 36% and emotional abuse at 30%. The consequences of such violence generate a burden on society as it is related to higher rates of mortality and morbidity. Violence against children is also a recognized economic burden to nations. China's gross domestic product losses incurred to physical and emotional abuse in 2010 were 0.84% and 0.47%, respectively. Previously, parenting programs implemented in China focused on improving child health and development without focusing on child maltreatment.

Parenting for Lifelong Health

Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) is a UK-based charity dedicated to supporting the scale-up of evidence-based, freely available parenting solutions to reduce violence against children and improve child wellbeing. The PLH program for families with young children aged 2-9 years (PLH-YC) has been rigorously tested in 6 low- and middle-income countries. Results from randomized controlled trials showed long-term reductions in overall maltreatment and family violence as well as immediate improvements in positive parenting, child behavior, and parental mental health.

In April 2022, PLH-YC was translated and culturally adapted to the Chinese context to ensure delivery efficiency and respond to the needs of parents of young children in mainland China. Parents participated in 8 weekly sessions of the program, with each session lasting about 120 minutes. Parents communicated with PLH-YC facilitators their goals and challenges in parenting and received training on topics such as engaging in playful, positive interactions, talking about feelings, praising and rewarding, setting household rules, redirecting negative behaviors, using consequences, and household conflict resolution.

Research design

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the trial was implemented in a hybrid format. In stage one, parents were recruited in the Hunan Province and enrolled in a face-to-face group intervention.

In stage two, participants were recruited through online platforms and enrolled in an online group intervention through a real-time video conferencing platform. Twenty-one participants enrolled in the program and completed pre-post assessments.

Research questions

1. What are the rates of participant recruitment, retention, enrolment, attendance, and dropout?
2. How do Chinese parents perceive the program's acceptability?
3. Does the programme result in reduced child maltreatment and its associated risk factors (parental stress, parental depression, and child problem behavior), and improve protective factors (positive parenting and social support)?

Research findings

There was a decrease in:

- Emotional maltreatment
- Physical maltreatment
- General maltreatment
- Child behavior problems.

The overall program was highly acceptable. Participants gave high ratings for the delivery format, parenting techniques, and program facilitators.



My family uses a lot of praise now.

[My child] used to be scolded every day, from when she got up in the morning, but the amount of scolding is much less now. If she doesn't get up, I have more strategies to deal with her rather than yelling or threatening to hit her.

– PLH-YC participant.





Participants and facilitators in stage one.

Program delivery

The adapted PLH-YC program was delivered in Mainland China in a hybrid format by five trained facilitators, all being postgraduate students. Participants attended an in-person or video conference session per week lasting about 120 minutes. Facilitators received 24-hour training over eight days conducted by professors specialized in child development and parenting and practitioners experienced in child protection.

Lessons learned

Impact: A parenting program built on processes of change that integrates parent-child relationship building through play and positive attention and child behavior change through social learning is essential to protect and promote young children's healthy growth and development. Even though this study was not designed to evaluate intervention effects, the effectiveness of adapted PLH-YC in reducing child maltreatment could support China's response to violence against children from a public health approach.

Scalability: There is a need to integrate it across existing service delivery systems within governmental and non-governmental institutions to ensure the access of adapted PLH-YC to families across China. The detailed structured manuals of the program allow its delivery with high content and process fidelity by facilitators with limited experience.

Contextual relevance: To build a safer and healthier environment for the development of children in China, it is essential to equip parents and caregivers with positive parenting

skills. The findings of this trial suggest great relevance and acceptability of PLH-YC in mainland China. The high content and process fidelity in the program delivery indicates that it is feasible to integrate it within existing social welfare programs in the country.

“ My husband is gradually participating in parenting. He used to play games after work and seldom played with our child. But I invited him to read illustrated stories together and gave him praise and positive attention since I attended the program. – PLH-YC participant.”



Family visit during the program.

Recommendations

The results of this study can inform an initial policy and planning strategy of PLH-YC implementation in mainland China. Further research is necessary to explore the cultural adaptation of PLH-YC to the Chinese context to guide an implementation strategy that will engage fathers and evaluate the long-term benefits of the program.

Playful parenting programs offer an excellent opportunity to reduce violence against children and adolescents in China. The group and interactive format delivery of PLH-YC was demonstrated in this trial. Nevertheless, to ensure the program's sustainability and scalability, it must be integrated within social welfare programs delivered through social, educational and public health services.

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