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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIP ENHANCEMENT TRAINING ON COMMUNICATION PATTERN
OF FAMILIES WITH ADOLESCENTS IN IBADAN, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Communication is the key to understanding the dynamics in family relations. Positive statements elicit positive responses and negative statements elicit negative responses. Out of this framework evolved the notion of training people to learn constructive relationship skills. The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of Relationship Enhancement Training on Communication Pattern of families with adolescents in Ibadan. Multistage random sampling method was used to select eighty (80) parents (40 males and 40 females) who met the diagnostic criteria for inclusion in the training programme. Participants responded to questionnaires on adolescence characteristics and parental behaviour handling styles. The t-test statistic and ANCOVA at 0.05 alpha levels were used. The findings revealed significant treatment effect ($F_{(1,76)} = 172.02$; $p < 0.05$) for participants exposed to relationship enhancement training compared to those in the control group. Furthermore, results also showed that fathers ($x = 91.67$) who participated in the programme improved better than mothers ($x = 90.61$) in their communication pattern with adolescents. The results implicate the need for inclusion of both parents in intervention programmes to improve parenting practices of families of adolescents.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication among family members is generally accepted as one of the most crucial facets of interpersonal relationship and is seen as a key to understanding the dynamics in family relations Clark and shield, 1997; Ojo, 2007). The quality of communication in families is also observed to be dependent upon the transfer or flow of information, the presence or absence of positive relationship characteristics, and constraints or barriers to communication within families. Ginsberg (1997) sees family communication as including constructive (positive) communication skills such as empathy, reflective listening, and supportive comments. Constraints to family communication occur when members engage in destructive behaviour (Huff, Laursen and Tardif, 2003). These behaviours may include criticism, violence, abuse, and neglect. The interplay of these factors determines whether family communication environments are open or represent problem communication (Barnes and Olsen, 1985). Communication involves the ability to pay attention to what others are thinking and feeling. In other words an important part of communication is not just talking but listening to what others have to say.

Every family has a general approval to the way in which they communicate with each other, and family communication researchers have come to label this general approach as family communication patterns (Koerner and Fitzpartrick, 2002). According to Ballaerd-Reisch and Weigel (2006), family communication pattern describe the ways family members communicate with one another.

Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) is based on the fundamental insight that creating a shared social reality is central to family functioning. Shared reality exists when family members' cognitions about an object are accurate, congruent, and in agreement. Sharing social reality with others makes understanding and being understood easier, leading to more efficiency and coordination and fewer misunderstandings and conflict. Consequently, families that share social reality should communicate with one another more accurately and with less conflict, supporting child adjustment (Koerner & Fitzpartrick, 2002).

Relationship Enhancement therapy aims at training client in the skills they need to identify and resolve causes of stress and discord in the family for themselves. A primary belief of (RE) therapy is that, lack of understanding of our intimates and ourselves undermines our functioning (Ginsberg, 1997).

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Conversely, understanding helps us cope and function better. A basic goal of RE therapy is not simply to increase understanding, but to use the skills acquire to resolve past hurts, act more effectively in the present, and to cope with life's disruptions in the future. According to this approach, enhanced relationships are those in which individuals have developed a greater capacity to better understand themselves and each other and are able to communicate that understanding. Ginsberg (1997) reiterated the fact that practicing communication/relationship skills based on the value of Re including empathy, language and relationships, emotional acknowledgement and acceptance (non-judgment and equivalence) builds a constructive context in which people can feel more open with each other.

Due to the dynamic nature of the parent-child relationship, adolescence becomes a difficult time for parents and children to communicate. Engaging adolescents and their parents in a structured communication process undermines the defensive posture that both parties so easily generate in conversation with each other. Much of the time this defensive posture arises from a sense of not being acknowledged. Adolescents are desperate to be acknowledged as grown up and to have their own point of view respected. Because they are more egocentric during this period, they are less likely to consider or acknowledge the perspective of others. This is often the source of conflict with their parents, who are threatened by the seeming change of power in relationships. Parents' need for acknowledgement of their continued importance to their children can be threatened by this very self-centeredness on the part of their offspring (Ginsberg, 1997).

Initially, age specifically contribute to effective parent-child communication. Xiong, Rettig and Tuicomepee, (2006) categorized early adolescents as individuals who were 10-12 years old, and mid adolescents as individuals who were 13-16 years old and late adolescents as individuals who were 17-22 years old. According to the authors, early adolescent experienced more frequent conflicts with their parents than any other adolescent age group, and mid adolescents experienced more intense conflicts with parents than early or late adolescents. Also, a study by Lanz, Iafate, Rosnati and Scabini (1999) found that younger adolescents in intact non-adoptive, separated families reported better communication than old adolescents. Guerrero and Afifi (1995) found research that supported the idea that middle adolescents were less likely than pre or post adolescents to be close to or communicate with their parents. According to Wood (2007), interpersonal climate is "the overall feeling or emotional mood between people-warm or cold, safe or anxious, comfortable or awkward, accepting or rejecting, open or guarded". (p.24). If there is a prior climate of support and strong emotional bonds in the parent-child relationship, their parent-child communication during adolescence will likely be approached with only minor changes to the communication climate. However, prior parent-child relationships without emotional bonds will likely experience disruption and unresolved issues during the child's adolescent span (Laursen and Collins, 2004).

Based on a family systems perspectives, mother's and father's parenting makes an important contribution to children's functioning, perhaps more important than the individual

contributions of mother's or father's parenting style (Lindsey and Mize, 2001). As such, understanding inter-parental agreement on parenting practices for parents in the same family has become increasingly important to developmental researchers and family practitioners. Although research on the degree of correspondence between maternal and paternal self-reported parenting styles is somewhat limited, there is evidence suggesting that parents using effective authoritative parenting strategies tend to have spouses with a similar parenting style, while parents using less effective parenting strategies tend to disagree often with their spouses (Winsler, Madigan and Aquilino 2005). Adolescents report more openness in communication with their mothers in comparison to communication with their fathers (Guerrero and Afifi, 1995, Heller, Robinson, Henry and Plunkett, 2006, Allen, 2010). The outcome of studies of the Parent-Adolescent Relationship Development (PARAD) program developed by Ginsberg (1977), pointed to improvement in self-concept of both adolescent and parent. In addition, the quality of the relationship improved, particularly in areas of trust, empathy, genuineness, intimacy, openness and relationship satisfaction (Ginsberg, 1977; Guerny, Vogelsong and Confal, 1982). Markman and Notarius (1993) examined four and five year follow-up data from evaluation of effects of prevention and relationship enhancement program, marital distress prevention program which teaches couples effective communication and conflict management skills. At five year follow-up invention, as compared with control, couples had higher levels of positive and lower levels of negative communication and lower levels of marital violence.

In another study, Saye (1998) carried out a study using 120 parents of adolescent in an attempt to improve the parenting effectiveness. They were trained in communication skills and conflict management strategies. He concluded that through training, parenting skills could be fostered among parents rather than hearing it by chance. These skills were found to be effective in enhancing relationship and better parenting. Similarly, Ojo (2007) carried out a study on effectiveness of behavioural intervention and relationships enhancement psychotherapies with parents of adolescents, parents exposed to relationship enhancement program improved better skills compared to those in the behavioural group.

By studying communication patterns, it is possible to understand such things as cohesion, decision-making processes and the rules that operate within the family system. While there has been some research done on the relationship of parent-child communication to the social and cognitive development of children (Steinberg, 1981) there have been little focus on parent-adolescent communication and its relationship for family functioning. Motivation for this study therefore derives from the need to help parents (father, mother or caregivers) acquire skills to identify and resolve causes of stress and discord within the family for themselves.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted pretest, posttest control group design which involved a 2 x 2 factorial matrix. Questionnaires were used to collect data from the respondents on the basis of gender.

Participants

Participants for the study were parents of adolescents. These adolescents were from intact families and must have been living with the two parents for a period of five years in the same environment as at the time of this study. Socio-Economic-Status and age were not criteria for inclusion in the study. Contacts were made with these parents through their children between the ages of 14 and 18 years. In this study, parents refer to two adults (male and female) living together with the adolescents who may or may not be their biological children. Four Local Government Areas were randomly selected from nine local governments in Ibadan metropolis. Four participatory schools were also randomly selected from twenty-eight Day Secondary Schools in the four local government areas. One hundred and twenty (120) questionnaires were distributed out of which ninety (90) were returned. Eighty (80) of the respondents indicated interest in participating in parenting seminar organized for four weekends, they also met the criteria for inclusion in the training.

Research Instruments

Measuring Beliefs about Adolescence (MBA) was one of the instruments used for the study. It was adapted from the scale developed by Buchanan, Hombeck, Allison and Hughes (1996). It was used as diagnostic instrument for screening participants for the study. The scale assessed parents' beliefs about adolescent characteristics (e.g., adolescents are active, arrogant, deceitful neat, tolerant etc).

The second instrument Parental Behaviour Handling Inventory was developed and validated by (Ojo, 2005). It is a 50-item instrument consisted of five subscales measuring parents' responses to adolescents' behaviours in families. The subscales include: Avoiding style (Parents should avoid conflict with adolescents instead of engaging in noisy argument); compromising style (Adolescents should be supported if what he/she does pleases the parents); Competing Style (Parental power when used leads to absolute compliance); Accommodating style (Parents should not allow what adolescents want to dictate what should be the family standard) and collaborating style (Parents should give priority to adolescent behaviour which they consider to be good). The reliability co-efficient Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 was used to ascertain the internal consistency of the instrument, it was found to be 0.81, 0.71, 0.83, 0.85, and 0.87 with an overall coefficient of 0.87.

Families who indicated interest and met the criteria for inclusion were given questionnaire sent through the adolescents in each of the schools used for the study. These parents were later given RE training including expressive skill, receptive skill, conversive skill and generalization skill.

Procedure

Selected families received a letter inviting them to attend free weekend training for parents of adolescents from Day Secondary Schools in Ibadan city. Those who returned questionnaires sent were subsequently called to verify that they

met the criteria for inclusion in the study, day and venue of the training were also conveyed.

Training sessions were held for the experimental group while the control group received no training. Four weeks was spent to train parents in using RE skills while those at home in relationship with adolescents in the control group had two weeks of interaction on adolescent.

Data Analysis

The analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and t-test statistical methods were used in the quantification of data. The 0.05 alpha level was utilized for effecting statistical decisions.

Results and Findings

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the parenting skills of participants exposed to Relationship Enhancement Psychotherapy and the control group.

Table 1. ANCOVA on the adjusted y-means of participants' parenting scores based on treatment (Rows) and Gender (Columns)

Variable	Source	SS	df	Ms	F	P
Parenting Skills	Rows	793.789	1	793.798	172.02	<0.05
	Columns	.217	1	.217	.05	ns
	Interaction	1.694	1	1.694	.37	ns
	Within	3014.000	76	4.614		

The result of the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) reported in Table 1 reveals a significant difference. The result confirms that the treatment was found to have contributed significantly to differences in participants' parenting skills as compared to the control groups ($F_{(1,76)} = 172.02$; $p < 0.05$). The hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 2

The hypothesis states that there will be no significant difference in the parenting skills of male and female participants exposed to Relationship Enhancement Psychotherapy.

Table 2. t-test comparison of the parenting skills scores of male and female participants

Group	N	x	df	t-obs	P	Remarks
Male	20	91.67		10.43	<.05	Significant
			38			
Female	20	90.61				

The t-test statistical analysis of the data for the second hypothesis presented in Table 2 above show that the t-observed value 10.43 is significant at 0.05 ($t_{obs} = 10.43$, $df = 38$, $p < 0.05$). The result indicated that significant difference existed between

the parenting skill of male and female participants. Consequent upon this, hypothesis two is rejected.

DISCUSSION

In discussing the first hypothesis, it is important to note that participants exposed to training in Relationship Enhancement recorded higher mean-scores than their counterparts in the control group. The explanation for this result is not far-fetched. First, relationship enhancement skills enable parents to establish stronger and more open relationship with adolescents and thereby create conducive home environment for family members. Furthermore, programme for participants in RE group include teaching the five core skills (Expressive skill, Receptive skill, conservative skill, generalization skills), guided practice (role playing) and some practice, all these improve communication between the adolescents and parents. Markman and Notarius (1991, cited by Saye, 1998) examined four and five year follow-up data from evaluation of effects of prevention and relationship enhancement program, marital distress prevention program which teaches couples effective communication and conflict management skills. At five year follow-up intervention, as compared with control, couples had higher levels of positive and lower levels of negative communication skills and lower levels of marital violence. The superior performance of relationship enhancement program compared to the control group concurred with Guerny and Flumen (1970) study in which teachers were trained and supervised in child-centered play therapy with children identified as withdrawn children. The children participating in these play sessions were compared to a control groups of withdrawn children from the same class. The children in the experimental groups had significantly improved their assertiveness in class while none of the children in the control group show such a pattern of improvement.

In the second hypothesis, it was found that gender differences existed in the parenting skills of male and female participants. As noted by Adeyemo (2001), this can be explained by the facts that in our culture males are motivated, urged and even compelled to excel than their female counterparts. The finding confirms Henley and Pasley (2005) report that cooperation and conflict co-exist in many relationships and so long as such interactions lack hostility and anger, conflict will not severely damage the father-son relationship. Lamb (1997) studies have also shown that when fathers assume their primarily caretaking role, they are as competent and as sensitive as mothers. While Gaaleys and Pease (1985) found the parenting practices of fathers and mothers to be significantly different. Wahler, Herring and Edward (2001) found fathers to be more supportive of their children's pro-social approaches than the acts of non-compliance from mothers.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study clearly demonstrated that RE training has proven effective in improving communication between parents and adolescents in families. Research on communication in family conflict has been motivated by a practical interest in improving family relationships for there is no relationship without communication.

From the result of this study, RE as a skill learning programme for families goes beyond teaching the skills but involve the application of skills which helps parents create a supportive context for their teenage children by being flexible and openly receptive of the adolescent's view.

The importance of parenting training for fathers has been established, unlike previous studies (Obadofin, 1991; Pitan, 1998) which focused on mothers parenting only. As the study's findings have shown that male participants improved significantly when compared with their female counterparts, studies on parenting education should always include both parents (fathers and mothers) for better outcomes in parenting practices in adolescent families.

The superiority of RE therapy could be attributed to the teaching and role playing techniques employed during training sessions which helped parents to acquire skills necessary to improve parents-adolescents relationship.

The results indeed proved that the RE program could improve communication in the families between parents and adolescent. The establishment of mentoring programs geared towards clarifying and nurturing both parents' involvements and investment in the families is recommended. This will be of greater benefit to the society at large, older and respectable parents in the community could serve as mentors to younger parents and role-models.

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