

#### About the Executive Summary

This executive summary provides the highlights of the most recent issue of the *Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly*, available for free at [childhealthpolicy.ca](http://childhealthpolicy.ca). The *Quarterly* presents the best available research evidence on a variety of children's mental health topics. The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development funds the *Quarterly*.

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#### About the Children's Health Policy Centre

We are an interdisciplinary research group in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. Our research focuses on reducing health inequities and improving social and emotional well-being for all children, and on the public policies needed to reach these goals. To learn more about our work, please see [childhealthpolicy.ca](http://childhealthpolicy.ca).



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# Parenting without physical punishment

Parents' use of physical punishment is on the decline — which is a good thing for children. As well as putting children at risk for injuries, physical punishment has been linked to poorer mental health and cognitive outcomes in young people. Notably, physical punishment is also not the most effective way to modify children's behaviour. Given these concerns, many countries have enacted laws prohibiting physical punishment, although Canada has yet to do so.

## Teaching better ways to discipline

But what are the alternatives? To answer this question, we conducted a systematic review of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) evaluating parenting interventions. We found five evaluations assessing three parenting programs that met our criteria: *Chicago Parent Program*; *Incredible Years* (one using the standard program and one using an enhanced version); and *Triple P — Positive Parenting Program* (one using universal delivery and one using targeted). All programs involved teaching parents to consistently use positive discipline and reduce their use of coercive discipline. But program intensity varied considerably, with the number of parenting sessions ranging from four (for *Triple P*) to 12 (for the *Chicago Parent Program*) to 27 (for *Incredible Years*).

## How improved parenting benefits children

- The *Chicago Parent Program* resulted in parents using less physical punishment and being more consistent in their use of discipline. Notably, children of parents who took this program also had fewer emotional and behaviour problems.
- *Incredible Years* (standard version only) reduced problematic discipline, including spanking. Both versions resulted in parents using more praise and rewards and giving their children more attention. Children of parents who took *Incredible Years* (standard version) also had fewer diagnoses of oppositional defiant disorder as well as reduced attention-deficit/hyperactivity symptoms. Enhanced *Incredible Years* also resulted in children having fewer aggressive symptoms overall.
- *Triple P* did not influence the use of physical punishment in either universal or targeted formats. There were two likely reasons for this:
  - With universal *Triple P*, delivered to the general population rather than only to those at risk, many parents may have already had effective parenting skills (including not using physical punishment). Additionally, their children may have had no behaviour problems, so the program made no difference for these parents.
  - With targeted *Triple P*, parents in the comparison group actually received an intervention — four sessions with a community nurse. So while taking *Triple P* did lead to improved parenting skills and children's behaviours, working with a community nurse led to similar gains.

## Applying findings in BC

Physical punishment harms children. And as our review demonstrates, there are effective alternatives that can be taught through parenting programs. In particular, *Incredible Years* stands out in that it has been evaluated not only in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom, where baseline health and social services are similar to Canada's. *Incredible Years* is therefore recommended for consideration in BC, with the goal of reducing the use of physical punishment for children. 🖐️