

A Peaceful Village: An intervention to help families cope with violence in their communities

Linda M. Oravec  
Towson University

Suzanne M. Randolph  
Sally A. Koblinsky  
University of Maryland

## Community Violence and Childhood Loss

- Neighborhood violence is a daily reality for many families participating in Head Start (Randolph, Koblinsky, Oravec, 2000).
- This exposure to violence puts young children at risk for a wide array of mental health problems (Ososky, Wewers, Hann, & Wick, 1993).
- A growing number of Head Start children are experiencing feelings of fear, grief and loss as a result of violence.

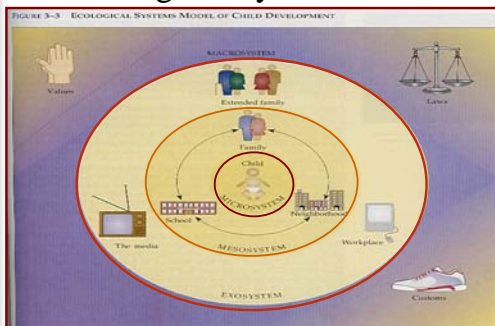
Violence exposure and loss may undermine young children's:

- \* Security
- \* Autonomy
- \* Cognitive/social competence
- \* Self-esteem

Children exposed to chronic community violence exhibit:

- \* Aggressive, impulsive behaviors
- \* Anxiety, withdrawal, and fear
- \* Regressive behaviors
- \* Impaired development of empathy, sensitivity, cooperation

## Ecological Systems Model



## Dissertation Research Question

*To what extent do two potential protective factors: **positive parenting and informal social support**,*

*and two potential risk factors, **family conflict and exposure to community violence**,*

*predict the social skills and problem behaviors of African American Head Start children living in violent neighborhoods?*

### Method

**PARTICIPANTS:**

- 223 African American caregivers, including
  - 185 mothers
  - 26 grandmothers
  - 12 other female relatives
- Mean age of 32.5 years, range: 18-67 years old
- Mean education 12 years
- All have 3-5 year old Head Start child (46% boys)
- All live in violent neighborhoods based on uniform crime data and Head Start assessments (72% have heard gunshots frequently in last year and 22% had a family victim of community violence)

### Method

**Measures:**

Child's exposure to community violence reported by mother using *Interview protocol*

Family Conflict: *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS)

Social support: *Family Support Scale* (FSS)

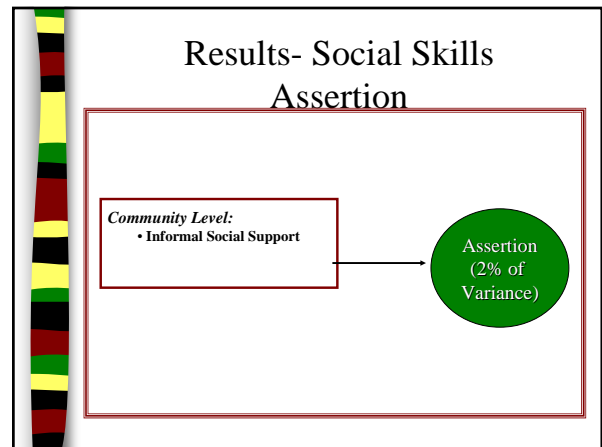
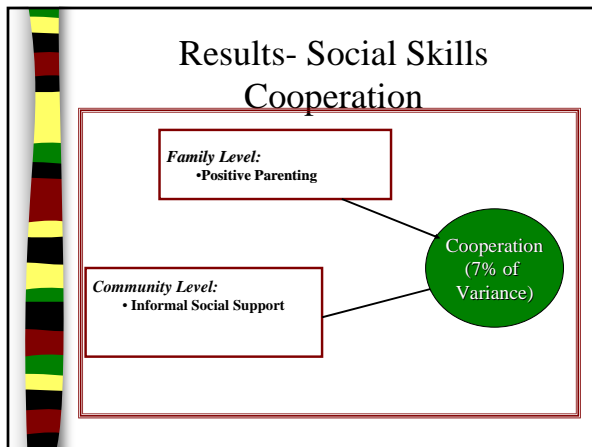
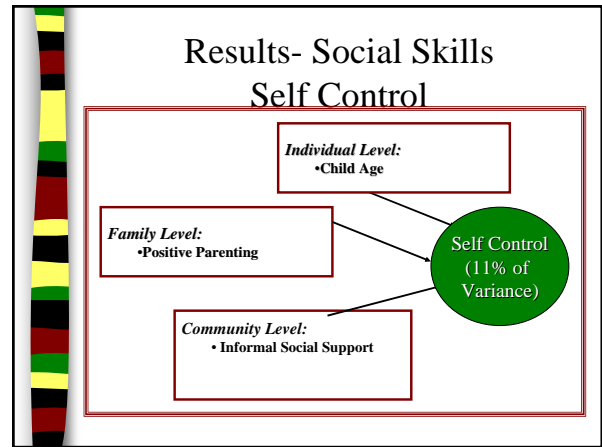
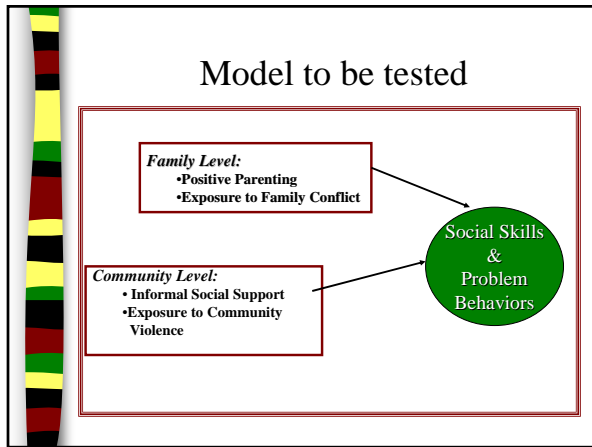
Parenting style: *Parenting Dimensions Inventory* (PDI)

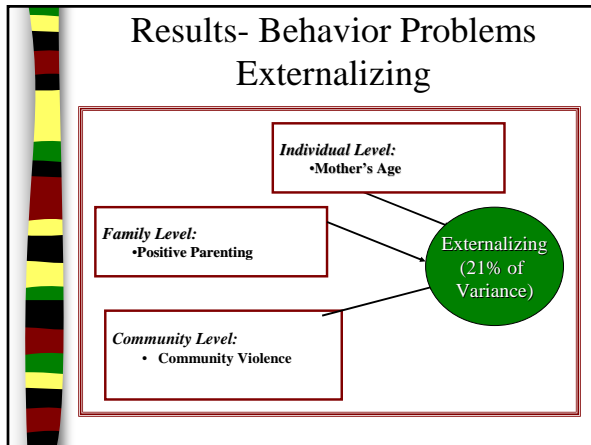
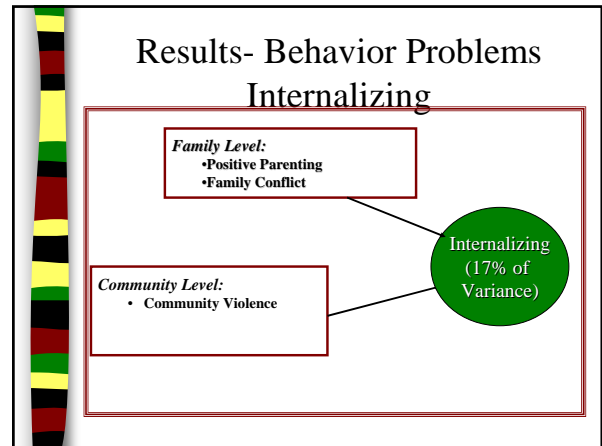
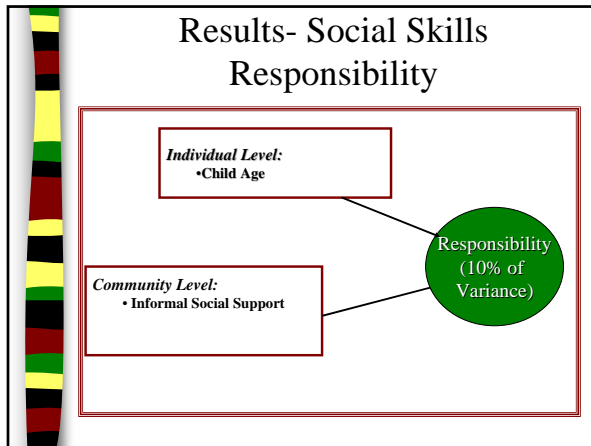
Social Skills: *Social Skills Rating System* (SSRS)

Problem behaviors: *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBC-L)

**Procedure:**

Interviews with female caregivers in Head Start centers





- ### Findings
- Low-income African American mothers who engaged in nurturant, consistent, responsive parenting and had more informal social support were more likely to have preschoolers who demonstrated self control and cooperative behavior.
  - Greater informal social support was associated with more responsible and positively assertive child behaviors.

- ### Findings
- Less positive parenting and exposure to community violence were strong predictors of preschool children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors, with higher levels of family conflict also predictive of more internalizing behaviors.
  - Younger maternal age was also a significant predictor of more externalizing child behaviors.

- ### Community Violence and Childhood Loss
- After examining the impact of community violence on preschoolers' development, focus groups with teachers from six DC area Head Start programs were also held to identify problems and assets.

### Community Violence and Childhood Loss

- In our interviews, we found several incidents of children losing fathers in shooting deaths, as well as several children who have directly witnessed brutal assaults involving weapons or ferocious dogs.
- Teachers described how violent themes often appeared in children's dramatic play
- Preschoolers acted out shootings, assaults, police arrests, and funerals.

### Intervention: *A Peaceful Village*

- Teachers can play a critical role in helping children deal with violence-related fear and loss.
- It is important that parents and teachers develop a consistent, caring response to traumatic events, such as death or any event that frightens a child.

### Intervention: *A Peaceful Village*

- A six-session, 20-hour violence intervention program for Head Start staff working in low-income, predominantly African-American communities was developed.
- The intervention program used themes built around the popularly known African-American Kwanzaa principles

### Intervention: *A Peaceful Village*

- Program Objectives:
  - To educate staff about developmental consequences of violence exposure and the protective factors that contribute to resilience
  - to train early childhood/family educators to improve children's safety
  - prepare them to help children deal with violence-related loss and stress

### Session One: "UMOJA"

- The first session, used the theme of "umoja" (Swahili for unity) to examine the "village" that must be involved in combating the problem.
- Teachers participated in activities where they shared impressions of how:
  - their Head Start center/neighborhood had been affected by violence,
  - evaluated the success of community agencies in protecting families,
  - examined the consequences of community violence on preschoolers' behavior.

### Session Four- "NIA"

- The fourth session, "nia" (or purpose), centered on steps that Head Start teachers could take to design a more peaceful classroom.
- Participants explored ways to modify the physical environment, the curriculum, work/play patterns, classroom rules, and staff behavior to promote more positive interaction.

### Session Four- "NIA"

- Through role-plays, teachers learned new classroom activities that promote cooperation, emotional expression, and conflict resolution. \*See handouts
- Teachers learned how to use dialogue and picture books to respond more effectively to young children's violence-related fears, grief, and loss.

### Helping Children Deal with Death

- Communicate with parents.
- Teach what "dead" means.
- Look for stress symptoms.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Talk to children about their loss.
- Encourage children to act out feelings through play.
- Encourage parents to share feelings of sadness.

### Helping Children Deal with Fears

- Talk about fears.
- Provide opportunities for dramatic play.
- Broaden the range of a child's coping skills.
- Read books about fears.
- Make emergency plans.
- Work with parents.
- Minimize exposure to TV about violent events.

### Evaluation

- pre-post evaluation of the intervention revealed that Head Start teachers increased:
  - their knowledge of violence and its effects on children,
  - their comfort in addressing children's aggression and violence-related fears/loss,
  - their implementation of strategies to promote child and center safety.

*"It takes a whole village to raise a child."*  
An African proverb



©Suzanne Randolph