



# JACOB'S HOPE

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JACOB WETTERLING RESOURCE CENTER

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## HELP FOR ALL PARENTS: IMPROVING PARENTING AND PREVENTING CHILD MALTREATMENT WITH THE ACT AGAINST VIOLENCE PROGRAM



***JWRC maintains hope that through quality programming and services provided to communities, adults can help protect children from victimization by giving them positive identities and values, appropriate boundaries and expectations, and the support they need to flourish.***

**By: Michele Knox, Ph.D<sup>1</sup>**

### INTRODUCTION

Ample research evidence has shown that prevention programs for parents and caregivers of children can reduce the risk of child abuse and prevent the recurrence of physical child abuse. Meta-analyses of parent training programs document moderate effect sizes for outcomes such as attitudes toward abuse, emotional adjustment, child-rearing skills, and child abuse.<sup>2</sup> Findings suggest that such interventions can influence both beliefs (e.g., parents' adaptive or maladaptive beliefs about their children's intentions and behaviors) and actual behavior (e.g., harsh discipline). Overall, the research to date suggests that, when parents are given support and help with the development of effective, nonviolent discipline techniques and other parenting skills, the likelihood of child abuse and violent behavior significantly decreases, and the benefits to children are considerable.<sup>3</sup>

### THE ACT AGAINST VIOLENCE PROGRAM

The ACT (Adults and Children Together Against Violence) Program is a child maltreatment and family violence prevention program that was developed by the American Psychological Association (APA). It is a primary prevention parenting program designed to prevent child maltreatment, build parents' positive, nonviolent parenting skills, and mobilize communities and families to protect children from violence.



### Our Mission:

Educate families and communities to prevent the exploitation of children.

### Our Vision:

Every child grows up in a healthy, safe world free from exploitation and abduction.

### Our Values:

It's a kid's job to be a kid and it's the adult's job to protect all kids.



The program accomplishes its mission by disseminating research-based information and skills to adults in simple, accessible, user-friendly messages and materials. A key feature of the ACT program is its emphasis on primary prevention; the goal of ACT is to prevent victimization before it occurs. It is designed to be universally available, and accessible to all segments of the population, regardless of level of risk. The program is culturally sensitive and materials and groups are available in Spanish, as well as English.

Through the course of eight 2-hour sessions, parents and caregivers of young children ages birth to eight years are taught and guided in the use of many aspects of positive, nonviolent parenting. These include responding calmly (not reacting emotionally) to children's behavior; understanding what children are capable of understanding and doing at the different ages; controlling anger when dealing with conflicts with children and other adults; modeling positive anger management and conflict resolution skills for children; resolving conflicts with children and other adults in

positive ways; using effective, nonviolent discipline to teach desired behaviors to children; eliminating harsh physical punishment; praising and reinforcing pro-social behaviors; using time-out, natural and logical consequences, and removal of privileges; understanding the negative impact of media and interpersonal violence on children; and advocating for children in schools and the community.

### IMPLEMENTATION OF ACT THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES

To date, ACT program leaders have trained thousands of professionals across the United States to facilitate the program for parents. ACT Facilitators are trained and certified professionals such as social workers, early childhood educators, psychologists, nurses, and others with bachelor or graduate degrees. To become an ACT Facilitator, professionals attend a two day workshop, where they are guided through the 8-session curriculum and taught evidence-based methods of teaching adults and working with diverse groups. The program is then implemented by the ACT Facilitators with support from their organizations, which include community-based social, health, and mental health service agencies; schools; community centers; local coalitions; detention centers; shelters; county health or public health departments; and other sites. These organizations hosting the program may offer the parent program themselves or in partnership with others in their communities to share the tasks and costs. Currently, the program is active in 46 communities in 20 states, and continues to grow.

To date, five ACT Regional Centers have been created by the American Psychological Association to help expand and decentralize the program.

The mission of the regional centers is to promote early violence prevention messages and the parent program in their regions; organize workshops to train ACT Facilitators; and provide assistance and support to local organizations and Facilitators implementing the program in their regions. APA provides technical assistance and financial support to help maintain high quality and fidelity of program implementation. The centers regularly offer grants to ACT Facilitators to help fund initial implementation of the program.

### THE IMPACT OF ACT: COMMUNITY EXAMPLES

To provide a better picture of how the program is carried out and received by agencies and parents, the following are detailed descriptions of the program in two communities.

#### Fairfax, VA

The program in Fairfax is conducted by a Facilitator working for a local agency that organizes developmental play groups for Latino mothers. From March to April of 2009, the Facilitator conducted the program in Spanish for a group of 14 Latino mothers. They attended the program voluntarily and were recruited at local elementary schools, through Healthy Families and through the county social service department. Flyers, calls, and personal contacts also were used to recruit the mothers. The mothers reported to the Facilitator that they decided to attend the program classes because they believed they needed to learn new things to be better parents. Participation in the classes was lively; mothers enjoyed the activities and liked to talk to each other. As a result of the program, mothers formed friendships and established connections with the hosting agency.

Mothers told the Facilitator that they were hitting less and yelling less at their children; that they understand how to discipline their children based on their age/developmental level; that they know children learn by imitating and observing them so the mothers pay closer attention to what they say to the children; and that they communicate better with their children.

### Parkville, MO

The program in Parkville is implemented by a local social service agency at a domestic violence shelter. The following is a report from the shelter's director about a recently completed group:

*"The response from the women has been overwhelming. It is particularly notable that it was required that only women with children could participate. We heard them discussing the program information in therapy sessions, in groups and in informal conversations in the shelter. When discussion extended the processing of the information, the women asked if they could have more sessions the following week. When a program generates such enthusiasm from clients it causes us to take notice. Here are some factors we think contributed to the program success:*

- a) the curriculum is solid, the information is excellent, and activities are engaging;*
- b) it was conducted by an outside facilitator;*
- c) it was presented as a series several nights a week, what helped build momentum and continuity;*
- d) it was beneficial to the women that the facilitator was a man teaching about parenting;*
- e) it generated interest and curiosity in the material, and helped women use their own experiences in class to explore parenting in a non-judgmental way.*

*We want to continue to offer this program."*

Below are some comments by parents who attended the program at a variety of sites throughout the U.S.

- "We created a code in the house so my husband and I use it when we find ourselves arguing in front of our children. Or we stop the arguing when we notice the children."*
- "I never thought that how even if we aren't yelling at our kids, but they hear us yelling at each other, we are exposing them to violence."*
- "G and I are always arguing, so we decided to try responding instead of reacting to each other and it has helped us to stop yelling so much."*
- "I always thought you had to punish a child and make him feel bad if he was going to learn to obey. I changed."*
- "I now understand the effect a parent can make on a child."*
- "I will never hit my children or let them think that hitting is OK."*
- "I learned to put me in my children's shoes."*
- "I learned to look at babies completely different. This program opened my eyes."*
- "Talk and listen to my kids, instead of reacting to situations."*
- "Know that you can handle a situation in more than just one way."*

### RESEARCH SUPPORTING ACT

Research on the ACT program has indicated that parents consider the program to be non-judgmental; they enjoy the interactive and participatory classes, and are using more effective, nonviolent methods of parenting.<sup>4</sup> In addition, findings demonstrate that parents who complete the program use less physically violent discipline,<sup>5</sup> and

that there are improvements in children's behavior following parents' completion of the program.<sup>6</sup> The most recent evaluation of the ACT program involved over 600 parents from 14 sites across the U.S.<sup>7</sup> Results indicate significant improvement in positive parenting behaviors and beliefs for parents and caregivers who complete the program. Results indicate that the program is effective in both Spanish and English. This evaluation indicated that ACT is an effective, low cost program that can be implemented with immigrant and second generation Latino parents as well as diverse English-speaking parents in a variety of settings.

Currently, a research team from the University of North Carolina Charlotte is conducting a comprehensive, multi-site outcome evaluation funded by the CDC Division of Violence Prevention; the study will be completed later this year. In addition, with funding from the Metlife Foundation, the Midwest II Regional Center and the APA are currently conducting a multi-site study of the efficacy of the program in Community Health Centers.





## ASSISTANCE IN IMPLEMENTING ACT

For more information please visit the ACT Against Violence website at [www.ACTAgainstViolence.org](http://www.ACTAgainstViolence.org). Training for individuals or agency staff can be scheduled through a Regional Center, and parent programs may be arranged in communities, through the local Regional Center Director.

- The **Western Regional Center** is located at JKF University Graduate School of Professional Psychology in Pleasant Hill, CA. The center is directed by Della Combs, MFT, [dcombs@jku.edu](mailto:dcombs@jku.edu).
- The **Midwest I Regional Center** is located at Pillars, a large social and mental health service organization in LaGrange, Illinois. It is directed by Margarita Hernandez, Psy.D., [mhernandez@pillarscommunity.org](mailto:mhernandez@pillarscommunity.org).
- The **Midwest II Regional Center** is located at the University of Toledo

College of Medicine, in Toledo, Ohio.

The center is directed by Michele Knox, Ph.D., [michele.knox@utoledo.edu](mailto:michele.knox@utoledo.edu).

- The **Northeast Regional Center** is located at the Lemberg Children's Center in Brandeis University, which is located in Waltham, Massachusetts. It is directed by Howard Baker, Ph.D., who can be reached via email at [baker@brandeis.edu](mailto:baker@brandeis.edu).
- The **Southeastern Regional Center** is located at the Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention & Treatment, Miami, Florida. It is directed by Trish Ramsay, M.A. For more information please contact Trish Ramsay at [trish@melissainstitute.org](mailto:trish@melissainstitute.org) or visit their website at [www.melissainstitute.org](http://www.melissainstitute.org).

## CONCLUSION

Hubert Humphrey once said "Each child is an adventure into a better life – an opportunity to change the old pattern and make it new."<sup>8</sup> The ACT program provides

parents the opportunity to change the old pattern of physically or emotionally harmful behavior and to adopt a new, effective parenting style benefiting parents and children alike.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Psychiatry; Director, ACT Against Violence Regional Center, University of Toledo College of Medicine.

<sup>2</sup> Lundahl, B. W., Nimer, J. & Parsons, B. (2006). Preventing child abuse: A meta-analysis of parent training programs. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 16(3), 251-262.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Porter, B. E. & Howe, T. R. (2008). Pilot evaluation of the ACT Parents Raising Safe Kids violence prevention program. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 1, 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Knox, M., Hunter, K., & Burkhart, K. (In press). ACT Against Violence Parents Raising Safe Kids Program: Effects on maltreatment-related parenting behaviors and beliefs. *Journal of Family Issues*.

<sup>6</sup> Knox, M. & Burkhart, K. (Manuscript under review). The ACT Against Violence Parents Raising Safe Kids Program: Exploring the Potential for Preventing Children's Behavior Problems.

<sup>7</sup> Weymouth & Howe, T. (Manuscript in preparation).

<sup>8</sup> Anne Geddes, *Cherished Thoughts With Love* (Photogenique Publishers 2005).

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT JWRC AND NCPTC:

The Jacob Wetterling Resource Center merged with the National Child Protection Training Center in February 2010. The merger is an effort to combine the groups' resources and strengthen common efforts to ensure every child grows up in a healthy, safe world free from abuse, exploitation and abduction. Please visit [www.jwrc.org](http://www.jwrc.org) to learn more about JWRC, a program of the National Child Protection Training Center. For information about NCPTC, please visit [www.ncptc.org](http://www.ncptc.org).

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