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Findings from an Experimental Study of A Programme for Parents of Young Children

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

Early childhood development is strongly influenced by parenting practices, the family environment, and parental well-being. Parent education programs may provide an important means of strengthening these factors. This study aimed to examine changes in parenting practices, the family internal environment, and parental well-being following an eight-week parent education intervention for parents of young children. A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test–follow-up design was used with 120 parents of children aged 2–3 years. Participants comprised an experimental group (n = 60) and a control group (n = 60), with 30 urban and 30 rural participants in each group. The eight-week intervention was informed by Knowles' adult learning theory, Montessori's concept of the Absorbent Mind, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Parental outcomes were assessed using the 19-item Parenting and Family Adjustment Scales (PAFAS) at pre-test, post-test, and six-month follow-up. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and mixed repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The experimental group demonstrated positive changes in parenting practices, the family internal environment, and parental well-being in both urban and rural settings. Compared with the control group, the experimental group showed greater positive changes across all three domains. The mixed repeated-measures ANOVA indicated statistically significant main effects of time ($p < .001$) and group ($p < .05$), as well as a significant time × group interaction ($p < .001$), indicating that changes over time differed between the experimental and control groups. The findings suggest that participation in the eight-week parent education intervention was associated with more favorable changes in parenting practices, the family internal environment, and parental well-being among parents of children aged 2–3 years. The findings also highlight the importance of considering urban and rural contexts when designing and implementing parent education interventions in Mongolia.

Keywords: early childhood development; parenting practices; family environment; parental well-being; parent education; urban and rural families.

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Introduction

One of the important variables that exert a sustained influence on a country's socio-economic development is early childhood development and the financial and intellectual investment that society makes in it.

Early childhood, particularly the period up to six years of age, is not only the most sensitive and intensive period of human development, but also

the period during which the foundations of brain development, cognition, language, and social–emotional development are laid. However, one unique characteristic of this age is that the child's development is a manifestation of the interdependence of directly related factors: (i) the child him- or herself; (ii) the behavior of his or her parents and caregivers; and (iii) social support.

Numerous studies continue to demonstrate that the quality of the relationship a child establishes with the family and caregivers among whom he or she grows up has a long-term influence on learning, health, and stable psychological development (Britto et al., 2017).

Therefore, on the one hand, it has become necessary to consider issues of early childhood development and education not only within the framework of preschool education institutions, but in close connection with the child's family and, in particular, with the participatory support of parents.

On the other hand, research findings highlight that the environment in which a child grows up, his or her daily experiences, and the quality of the relationship established with caregivers have a long-term effect on the child's later learning ability, health, and social adjustment (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2017). Consequently, the prevailing approach is to study early childhood development not only in connection with the activities of preschool education institutions, but in relation to the family as the child's primary everyday environment, and in particular to parental involvement and parenting practices.

This approach is consistent with the **Nurturing Care Framework** developed by the WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and partner organizations. The framework defines health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for early learning as interrelated core conditions for child development, and emphasizes the participation of parents, families, and communities in ensuring these conditions (WHO, UNICEF, & World Bank, 2018).

A considerable number of studies have explained the influence of the family environment on child development using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. According to this theory, child development is the outcome of interactions between the child and the multiple levels of the surrounding environment, and the family constitutes the closest microsystem of the child's everyday development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Accordingly, parental behavior, patterns of interaction, and the ability to understand and respond to the child's needs are regarded as important factors that determine the quality of the family environment supporting development.

Studies also show that supportive and responsive parenting practices that are appropriate to the child's age and developmental characteristics promote children's self-regulation, social–emotional development, motivation to learn, and positive behavior, whereas excessively strict control, inconsistent interaction, and punishment-based methods may have negative consequences (Bornstein, 2015; Pinquart, 2017). Furthermore, not only parental control but also care, support, mutual understanding, and respect for the child's autonomy are important for child development; the parental role is thus regarded not as being limited to setting rules and exercising control, but as a comprehensive process of supporting trust-based relationships and opportunities for growth (Baumrind, 1991; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Contemporary positive parenting approaches focus on responding sensitively to the child's needs, communicating respectfully, supporting autonomy, and solving problems collaboratively (Sanders, 2012).

Therefore, improving parenting practices is not merely a matter of changing parental behavior but a fundamental mechanism for enhancing the quality of the family environment that supports child development. As parents' knowledge and skills increase, so do their opportunities to understand the child's behavior in relation to his or her developmental characteristics, to respond in accordance with the child's needs, and to apply positive communication strategies to

support development (Kaminski et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2019). Research findings also continue to emphasize that implementing parent-based programs, particularly in the first years of early childhood, has a positive effect on children's cognitive, language, and social–emotional development (Jeong et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that evaluating the effectiveness of parenting programs for early childhood development solely in terms of changes in parents' knowledge and understanding is insufficient, because parenting practices, the quality of family relationships, and psychological well-being need to be considered together. In other words, parents' psychological state influences their everyday behavior in interacting with the child, their parenting decisions, and their ability to respond sensitively to the child's needs (Borelli et al., 2021; Neece et al., 2020). When parental stress and psychological burden are high, the risk increases that negative emotions will predominate in interactions with the child, that parents will approach problems impatiently, and that they will use punitive methods; when parents are psychologically stable, by contrast, they tend to evaluate their parental role positively and show greater coping ability and greater sensitivity to the child's needs (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). At the same time, parental well-being, the family climate, and children's social–emotional development exist within an interdependent system (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Prime et al., 2020).

On this basis, parent education programs need to be regarded not merely as information-transmission activities, but as a process that comprehensively develops parents' knowledge, beliefs, parenting behavior, problem-solving skills, and psychological resources. According to Knowles's theory of adult learning, change is more sustainable when adults learn on the basis of problems related to their previous experience, real needs, and life circumstances (Knowles et al., 2015). From the perspective of Bandura's social cognitive theory, behavioral change occurs not only through the acquisition of information but also through observation, practice, and belief in one's own capabilities (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, parenting programs that support early childhood development have a legitimate need to create opportunities for parents to recognize real problems, seek solutions, practice new approaches, and reflect on and evaluate their experiences.

The research design and the frequency of measurement are also important in determining program effectiveness. A single post-program assessment may detect immediate change but is insufficient to determine whether behavioural change is sustained. Therefore, combining a **pre-test, a post-test, and a follow-up assessment** is more appropriate for determining both the immediate and the sustained effects of a program (Mara, 2026; Rausch et al., 2003).

Moreover, parenting practices, the structure of family support, and program accessibility are closely related to the given social and cultural context (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). In the Mongolian context, families in the city and in *soum* centres may differ in terms of social support networks, access to information and professional services, and living conditions. While urban families have relatively high access to information and educational services, they may be affected by workload and time constraints; in rural families, by contrast, support from relatives and close social circles is maintained, but access to professional counselling and developmental services may be limited (UNICEF Mongolia, 2021).

Therefore, the outcomes of parenting programs that support early childhood development need to be evaluated comprehensively, not only in terms of child development outcomes, but in relation to changes in parents' knowledge, parenting practices, psychological well-being, and the family environment, as well as the given social and cultural context. This can be considered to provide a theoretical and practical foundation for developing effective and sustainable programmes that meet the needs of urban and rural families in Mongolia.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test–follow-up design was used to examine changes in parental outcomes over time and differences between the intervention and control groups. The study included 120 parents of children aged 2–3 years. Participants were equally assigned to an intervention group (n = 60) and a control group (n = 60), with 30 urban and 30 rural participants in each group.

Eligibility criteria included having a child aged 2–3 years, providing voluntary informed consent, participating regularly in the intervention, and completing the required assessments. Follow-up data were collected six months after completion of the intervention.

Intervention

The eight-week parent education intervention was informed by Knowles' adult learning theory, Montessori's concept of the Absorbent Mind, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. It focused on child development, positive parenting and parent–child relationships, the home learning environment, children's social-emotional development, and parent–kindergarten collaboration. Sessions incorporated interactive discussions, case-based learning, practical activities, and guided reflection.

Instrument and Data Collection

Parental outcomes were assessed using the Parenting and Family Adjustment Scales (PAFAS). The instrument was translated and adapted to the study context, reviewed by experts, and pilot tested prior to the main data collection. The final version comprised 19 items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3 and included three subscales: parenting practices, family internal environment, and parental well-being.

Data were collected at three time points: pre-test, post-test, and six-month follow-up.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to examine changes in the three subscale scores across the measurement points and to compare patterns between urban and rural participants. A mixed repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the main effects of time and group and the time × group interaction. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$. Partial eta squared (η^2p) was reported as an effect-size measure, with values of .01, .06, and .14 interpreted as small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Result

Table 1. Structure of Study Participants

Group	Urban	Rural	Total
Experimental group	30	30	60
Control group	30	30	60
Total	60	60	120

The following criteria were applied in selecting study participants: having a child aged 2-3 years; having given voluntary consent to participate; being able to participate regularly in programme activities; and being able to complete the questionnaires and evaluation forms

independently.

The Parenting and Family Adjustment Scales (PAFAS) were used to assess parenting practices, family relationship characteristics, and parental well-being. The instrument is a 19-item Likert-type rating scale and was used after it had been translated into Mongolian and culturally adapted. The quality of the translation was verified through expert review and a pilot test. Eight worksheets and reflective notes collected during program implementation were used as qualitative data.

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS. Participants' demographic characteristics and the status of the main variables were described using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, arithmetic means, and standard deviations), and the internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq .70$ was considered acceptable). To determine changes across the three time points (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) and differences between the experimental and control groups, a mixed-design repeated-measures analysis of variance (Mixed Repeated Measures ANOVA) was used; the level of statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$, and effect sizes were calculated as partial eta squared ($\eta^2 p$) (.01 = small, .06 = medium, .14 and above = large effect).

All participants were between 25 and 35 years of age. In terms of educational attainment, 60% of the rural group held a bachelor's degree, 5% held a master's degree or higher, and 35% had completed secondary education, whereas in the urban group 73% held a bachelor's degree, 12% held a master's degree or higher, and 15% had completed secondary education. In terms of employment, 35% of the rural group were civil servants, 35% were self-employed, and 30% belonged to herding households, whereas in the urban group 28% were civil servants and 72% were self-employed (Table 2).

Table 2. General Characteristics of Study Participants

Characteristic	**Rural (n = 60)**	**Urban (n = 60)**
Age (years)	25–35	25–35
Education — Master's degree or higher	5.0%	12.0%
Education — Bachelor's degree	60.0%	73.0%
Education — Complete secondary	35.0%	15.0%
Employment — Civil service	35.0%	28.0%
Employment — Self-employed	35.0%	72.0%
Employment — Herding household	30.0%	–

Results

In this study, the outcomes of the education program developed for parents of young children were evaluated in terms of changes in parental interaction and behavior (hereafter, parenting practices), the family's internal relational environment, and parental well-being. The results were analysed by comparing measurements at three stages—before the

intervention, after program implementation, and at follow-up—and differences in change between participants from the city and from *soum* centres were also examined.

To verify the reliability of the quantitative data, the internal consistency of the *PAFAS* instrument was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient; the reliability of the overall scale was $\alpha = 0.80$. For the subscales, parenting practices yielded $\alpha = 0.79$, family internal environment $\alpha = 0.78$, and parental well-being $\alpha = 0.83$, demonstrating that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for use in this study.

Table 3. Reliability of the PAFAS Instrument

Dimension	**Number of items**	**Cronbach's α**
Parenting practices	8	0.79
Family internal environment	6	0.78
Parental well-being	5	0.83
Total scale	19	0.8

Following programme implementation, consistent progress was observed in the experimental group's scores on all three subscales (parenting practices, family internal environment, and well-being).

Table 4. Longitudinal Changes in Subscale Scores among Parents in the Experimental Group in Urban and Rural Areas

Subscale	**Setting**	**Pre-test**	**Post-test**	**Follow-up**	**Change**
Parenting practices	Urban	1.13	1.5	1.75	+0.62
Parenting practices	Rural Area	1.5	1.63	1.88	+0.38
Family internal environment	Urban	1.17	1.5	1.83	+0.66
Family internal environment	Rural Area	1.17	1.5	1.83	+0.66
Well-being	Urban	1.4	1.6	1.8	+0.40
Well-being	Rural Area	1.4	1.6	2.0	+0.60

Table 4 presents changes in the three subscale scores among parents in the experimental group across the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up assessments, separately for urban and rural areas. Overall, mean scores increased across all three subscales from pre-test to follow-up, although

the magnitude of change varied by setting and domain.

In urban areas, the mean score for parenting practices increased from 1.13 at pre-test to 1.50 at post-test and 1.75 at follow-up, corresponding to a net increase of 0.62 points. The family internal environment increased from 1.17 to 1.50 and 1.83, respectively (+0.66), while parental well-being increased from 1.40 to 1.60 and 1.80 (+0.40).

In rural areas, parenting practices increased from 1.50 at pre-test to 1.63 at post-test and 1.88 at follow-up (+0.38). The family internal environment followed the same pattern as in the urban group, increasing from 1.17 to 1.50 and 1.83 (+0.66). Parental well-being increased from 1.40 to 1.60 and 2.00, representing a net increase of 0.60 points.

The pattern of change therefore differed by setting. The largest increase in the urban group was observed in parenting practices (+0.62), whereas the largest increase in the rural group was observed in parental well-being (+0.60). The family internal environment showed the same net increase in both settings (+0.66). These descriptive findings indicate positive changes across the three measurement points; comparisons between the experimental and control groups are presented separately in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of Changes between Experimental and Control Groups in Urban and Rural Areas

Subscale	**Setting**	**Experimental group**	**Control group**
Parenting practices	Urban	+0.76	+0.09
Family internal environment	Urban	+0.66	+0.07
Well-being	Urban	+0.80	+0.08
Parenting practices	Rural Area	+0.87	+0.08
Family internal environment	Rural Area	+0.67	+0.07
Well-being	Rural Area	+0.80	+0.07

Table 5 compares changes in the three subscale scores between the experimental and control groups in urban and rural settings. Overall, the experimental group demonstrated greater positive changes than the control group across all three subscales.

For parenting practices, the experimental group showed changes of +0.76 in the urban setting and +0.87 in the rural setting, compared with +0.09 and +0.08, respectively, in the control group. For the family internal environment, the corresponding changes were +0.66 in the urban experimental group and +0.67 in the rural experimental group, whereas both urban and rural control groups showed a change of +0.07. Parental well-being also showed greater improvement in the experimental group, with changes of +0.80 in both urban and rural settings, compared with +0.08 in the urban control group and +0.07 in the rural control group.

Overall, the experimental group showed consistently greater positive changes than the control group across parenting practices, family internal environment, and parental well-being in

both settings. The largest change in the experimental group was observed in parenting practices in the rural setting (+0.87), followed by parental well-being in both urban and rural settings (+0.80). In contrast, changes in the control group were comparatively small across all three subscales, ranging from +0.07 to +0.09. These findings indicate a clear pattern of greater improvement among parents who participated in the program than among those in the control group. The statistical significance of these changes over time and the differences between groups are examined further using the mixed repeated-measures ANOVA.

Mixed Repeated-Measures ANOVA:

A mixed repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to examine whether changes in parents' scores across the three measurement points differed between the experimental and control groups. The analysis revealed a statistically significant main effect of time ($p < .001$), indicating that parents' scores changed significantly across the measurement points. A statistically significant main effect of group was also observed ($p < .05$), indicating an overall difference between the experimental and control groups.

Importantly, the time × group interaction was statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the pattern of change over time differed significantly between the experimental and control groups. This finding is consistent with the descriptive results presented in Table 5, where the experimental group demonstrated substantially greater positive changes across parenting practices, family internal environment, and parental well-being than the control group in both urban and rural settings. Overall, the findings provide statistical support for the observed differences in change between the two groups.

Conclusion

This study examined the outcomes of an eight-week parent education intervention for parents of children aged 2–3 years using a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test–follow-up design. The findings showed positive changes in parenting practices, the family internal environment, and parental well-being among parents in the experimental group across both urban and rural settings.

Compared with the control group, the experimental group demonstrated greater positive changes across all three domains. The mixed repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed statistically significant effects of time and group, as well as a significant time × group interaction, indicating that changes over time differed between the experimental and control groups. Although the magnitude of change varied across domains and settings, the overall pattern was consistently more favourable among parents who participated in the intervention.

These findings suggest that parent education that integrates knowledge of child development, positive parenting practices, family relationships, and parental well-being can provide a meaningful approach to strengthening the family environment that supports young children's development. The findings also highlight the importance of considering the different contexts of urban and rural families when designing and implementing parent education interventions in Mongolia.

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