

METHODS

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This review of the evidence base for strengthening families is based on peer-reviewed as well as unpublished (grey literature) English-medium evaluation and impact studies. It relies heavily on existing research review articles and meta-analyses of family strengthening activities and programs. To the extent that individual studies have been included, they reflect large scale evaluation studies, either of government programs that have been or are being rolled out to scale or model programmes that have been implemented in multiple and/or diverse settings. This review primarily focuses on programmes that target the family for an intervention or services or have some component of family participation and engagement that is measured as outcome data.

One of the central challenges in evaluating the evidence base of programmes that strengthen the family is that many programmes which may in fact strengthen families may not necessarily define themselves as such. Making decisions about which kinds of programs to include was therefore central. This review focuses principally on in-kind programmes,¹ many of which fall under the broad rubric of family support services. The following kinds of programme were included:

- Early Childhood Development Programs with a family/parent component
- Parenting and Family Support Programs
- Home Visiting Programs
- School-linked services with a family/parent component
- After school and Out-of-School Time Programs with a family/parent component

Programmes or interventions that target only children or only the quality of relationship between parents (i.e. marriage counseling or marriage promotion) or caregivers have not been included. This review includes interventions that are both preventative and promotive in orientation. Although many of the interventions/programs included target specific populations (i.e. teenage mothers, at-risk youth, low-income families,) or “problem” behaviors (juvenile delinquency, substance use), other interventions/programs are more universal in orientation. Only programs which 1) have been evaluated and 2) measure outcomes at the level of child (i.e. cognitive development, socio-emotional development) parent (i.e. parenting skills, emotional health, knowledge of child development) and/or family (i.e. parent-child communication, family cohesiveness) have been included. Also, only parent and family-level outcomes demonstrated to have direct relationships to children’s outcomes have been included.²

¹ This is not to under-estimate the importance of income support and cash transfers programmes for strengthening families. Cash transfers, however, are being addressed in another JLICA paper, and it was necessary to limit the scope of this paper.

² This will be further elaborated in the discussion on outcomes.

Search Strategy

The following biomedical and social science databases were searched for relevant literature published over the past ten years (1997-2007).

- EBSCO (which includes Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Health Source, MEDLINE, and PsychINFO, among others),
- The Cochrane Library
- ISI Web of Knowledge
- Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (Social Science and Sociological Abstracts)

Search terms used for identifying relevant articles included: “early childhood development”, “parent support”, “family support”, “family strength”, “home visiting” “youth development”, “after school program”, “evaluation”, “parent-child relations”, “parental death,” and “resilience.” Terms were searched both individually and in combination with one another (i.e. “youth development and evaluation”). Together these respective searches yielded hundreds of citation. Abstracts were then reviewed and included or excluded based upon the selection criteria. Additional references were also identified through mining the bibliographies of relevant articles, books, and chapters.

In addition to searching the published literature, unpublished literature was accessed through online Internet searches (namely Google) and the websites of international institutions (i.e. United Nations, World Bank), NGO’s (i.e. Family Strengthening Policy Center) and research institutions (i.e. Harvard Family Research Project). The preponderance of studies and data emanate from the United States and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom, where evaluation studies are most commonly conducted.

The Nature of the Evidence

The original intent of the review was to include high quality programs that had been rigorously evaluated using experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies, in particular the randomized controlled trial (RCT) which is commonly recognized as the “gold standard” in evaluating effectiveness. Although broadly recognized as necessary for establishing a strong evidence base the use of RCTs, derived from biomedical research, however is not yet commonly employed in social intervention research. In addition, the use of experimental designs may not always be appropriate within in the context of social services. Although this review recognizes that from the perspective of program replication and dissemination, the results of RCTs carry the greatest weight in evaluating the evidence base of any program or intervention, the results of evaluations using less rigorous methodologies have also been included. In addition, review articles vary in terms of their own inclusion criteria. Some include studies that employ only RCTs, while others cast a wider net and include qualitative and descriptive studies.