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# Conjoint Behavioral Consultation: A Model to Facilitate Meaningful Partnerships for Families and Schools

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Susan M. Sheridan, Brandy L. Clarke, Diane C. Marti, Jennifer D. Burt,  
and Ashley M. Rohlk, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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For more information on the topic of this paper  
email Susan Sheridan at [ssheridan2@unl.edu](mailto:ssheridan2@unl.edu)



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Harvard Family Research Project • Harvard Graduate School of Education • 3 Garden Street • Cambridge, MA • 02138  
Website: [www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org) • Email: [hfrp@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:hfrp@gse.harvard.edu) • Tel: 617-495-9108 • Fax: 617-495-8594

## Research Background

Over the past 20 years research has demonstrated consistently that the involvement of parents in the education of children and adolescents is beneficial for development and academic success (e.g., Chavkin, 1993; Epstein, 1989, 1991). Parent participation and cooperation in the educational arena has been found to be related to increased student achievement, better school attendance, better study habits, fewer discipline problems, more positive attitudes toward school, more regular homework habits, more congruence between the school and family, and more familiarity between the teacher and family (Christenson & Christenson, 1998). When parents are involved in their child's education, (a) children may acquire skills and knowledge beyond those attainable through school experiences alone (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), (b) children may develop an enhanced sense of efficacy for doing well in school (Ames, 1993), and (c) parents may become better able at securing an appropriate education for their children when they understand their children's rights (Sheridan, Cowan & Eagle, 2000). The benefits to students are evident even after students' abilities and socioeconomic status are taken into account.

Among the various models by which parents and family members can participate in learning, those that espouse active collaboration and meaningful partnerships between families and educators have gained support (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Conjoint behavioral consultation (CBC) is a partnership model of service delivery wherein parents or other primary caregivers, educators, and service providers work collaboratively to meet a child's developmental needs, address concerns, and achieve success by promoting the competencies of all parties (Sheridan, Kratochwill & Bergan, 1996). CBC creates opportunities for families and schools to work together around a common interest, and build on and promote capabilities and strengths of family members and school personnel. Needs are identified and addressed using an organized, data-based approach through mutual and collaborative interactions between parents and teachers, with the guidance and assistance of a consultant (e.g., school psychologist).

The CBC process is implemented via four stages: needs identification, needs analysis, plan development, and plan evaluation. Three of the stages use an interview format to structure decision making. The overall goal is to effectively address parent and teacher identified desires or needs for the child in a collaborative, strength-based manner. Specific objectives of CBC are to:

- Address concerns as they occur across, rather than only within settings.
- Enhance effective home-school partnerships to benefit student learning and performance.
- Establish joint responsibility for problem solution.
- Improve communication and interaction among the child, family, and school personnel.
- Assess needs comprehensively and functionally.
- Promote continuity and consistency among change agents and across settings.
- Support transfer and maintenance of treatment effects across settings.
- Provide opportunities for parents to be empowered using a strength-based orientation.
- Develop skills and competencies to promote continued effective problem solving between the family and school personnel (Sheridan et al., 1996).

Large scale research has demonstrated that CBC is effective in addressing academic, behavioral, and socioemotional concerns across home and school settings (Sheridan, Eagle,

Cowan & Mickelson, 2001). Young children (i.e., early elementary age) were found to benefit more relative to their older (i.e., middle/high school) peers, suggesting that CBC may be particularly beneficial in early intervention contexts.

The present study strove to investigate the effects of CBC on a preschool sample to determine whether it can be useful in addressing concerns at the earliest stages of formal schooling. Two questions framed the present study. The first question sought to identify whether CBC can be effective in addressing the concerns that parents and teachers had for preschool children. The second question assessed the perceptions that parents and teachers held about CBC upon completing the process—in other words, whether they found it acceptable as a model of working together.

## Research Methods

Participants for this investigation were fifteen parents and fourteen 3–4-year-old children of low-income families with ethnically diverse backgrounds, along with nine teachers, and five consultants. All children were enrolled in a Head Start program in a Midwestern city. Fifty-seven percent of the children were Caucasian, 21% were Chinese/Vietnamese, 14% were African American, and 7% were Hispanic. Twenty-nine percent of the families spoke a language other than English in the home.

Head Start teachers referred children to the CBC process due to their concerns about a child's social, behavioral, or academic development. Teachers and parents engaged in a series of CBC interviews through which specific child-related concerns were addressed using a collaborative approach.

- In the initial stage of the process (needs identification), caregivers and teachers prioritized their concerns (e.g., increasing compliance with group routines, decreasing aggressive behaviors toward peers) for the child.
- In the second stage (needs analysis), observations and goals were discussed, and consistent treatment plans were developed by the consultant, parents, and teachers.
- In the third stage (plan implementation), the plans were implemented across the home and Head Start environments and progress toward desired goals was consistently monitored.
- Finally, in the fourth stage (plan evaluation), the child's progress toward goal attainment and plan modifications were determined.

The degree to which the CBC process addressed the identified needs and goals of each child were assessed in several ways. The significance of the change in the child's behavior after consultation was determined using effect sizes. Effect sizes reflect the degree of change for each child along a continuum of *small or not very significant* (.2), *medium or moderately significant* (.5), or *large or highly significant* (.8; Cohen, 1992). Additional measures were used to assess the caregivers' and teachers' perceptions of the child's progress, and their acceptability of and satisfaction with the CBC process. The degree to which parents and

teachers believed that the child's goals were attained was also assessed. Finally, parents' and teachers' satisfaction with the consultant was evaluated after they completed CBC.

## Research Findings

Direct observations revealed that interventions implemented through CBC were highly effective in addressing Head Start children's social, behavioral, and academic concerns across settings. There was a large degree of variability in individual case outcomes, suggesting that CBC was more effective for some Head Start children than others. Further research is needed to determine whether there are identifiable characteristics of children or families that lead to higher degrees of success for some children.

Both parents and teachers reported that they believed the CBC process to be acceptable and effective, and they were highly satisfied with the process. Likewise, both teachers and parents reported that they believed the process was effective at meeting the goals for the child. Finally, parents and teachers were also very satisfied with the CBC consultant.

## Implications for Practice

This study revealed that CBC was effective in addressing various developmental concerns for at-risk children in Head Start settings. Such findings suggest that using a structured, data-based, collaborative approach to decision making and intervention implementation provides caregivers and educators with the means to consistently attend to the needs of children across both environments and promote educational success.

Teachers and caregivers also found the process to be highly acceptable and reported great satisfaction overall. As a result, they were more likely to actively participate and believe in the CBC process, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the intervention implemented. This finding suggests that programs should strive for and continually monitor parent and teacher satisfaction with family involvement efforts.

CBC is an effective model that serves as a means for building collaborative relationships between families and Head Start programs. This model provides parents with an opportunity to become involved in their child's learning in a meaningful context and reconceptualize their role in the learning and education of their child (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Collaborative planning provides a context for validating the expertise that parents bring to the relationship and may enhance their sense of efficacy as an essential partner in connection with the educational setting. Using such a model in early intervention with young children will provide continued opportunities for teachers and caregivers to engage in meaningful partnerships across home and educational settings and address several developmental issues that face young children at risk.

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