

Value Added Benefits of Strengths-Based Practices: Reflections on More Than 40 Years of Research

Carl J. Dunst

Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute

Asheville, North Carolina

Webinar Presentation for the 50th Anniversary of the Family, Infant and
Preschool Program, January 21, 2022.

Purpose of the Webinar

- Describe three different strengths-based approaches to early childhood intervention and family capacity-building practices
- Illustrate the value-added benefits of the three different strengths-based practices
- Provide examples of how the value-added benefits were observed or reported by study participants

What are Value-Added Benefits?

- Value-added benefits are outcomes of intervention practices that are in addition to those you would expect from business-as-usual (e.g., Part C early intervention practices)
- Value-added benefits are manifested both in persons that are the focus of intervention practices (e.g., children with developmental disabilities) and the persons using the intervention practices (parents, teachers, therapists, etc.)
- Strengths-based practices have proven to have optimal value-added benefits in early childhood intervention

Brief History of Strengths-Based Models

- Woodhouse, C. G. (1930). A study of 250 successful families. *Social Forces*, 7, 511-532.
- Otto, H. A. (1962). What is a strong family? *Marriage and Family Living*, 24, 77-81.
- Bowman, T. (1976). Developing strengths in families. *Family Coordinator*, 25, 169-174.
- Stinnett, N. (1979). Strengthening families. *Family Perspective*, 13, 3-9.
- Olson, D. H., Larsen, A. S., & McCubbin, H. I. (1983). Family strengths. In D. H. Olson, H. I. McCubbin, H. L. Barnes, A. S. Larsen, M. L. Muxen, & M. A. Wilson (Eds.), *Families: What makes them work* (pp. 261-262). Sage Publication.
- Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. L. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Chicago, IL: ACTA.
- Hobbs, N., Dokecki, P. R., Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Moroney, R. M., Shayne, M. W., & Weeks, K. H. (1984). *Strengthening families*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Leffert, N., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain, J. L. (1997). *Starting out right: Developmental assets for children*. Search Institute.

Two Approaches to Describing Strengths-Based Practices

- Strengths defined as family and family member traits, beliefs, values, and relationship qualities (e.g., appreciation, commitment) that promote and enhance positive functioning.
- Strengths defined as family and family member behavior, abilities, propensities, and interests used to (a) obtain or procure resources and supports or (b) engage in desired activities.

Research Evidence for the Relationships Between Family and Family Member Strengths and Parent, Family and Child Benefits (Trait-Based Evidence)

- Dunst, C. J. (2021). Family hardiness and parent and family functioning in households with children experiencing adverse life events: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Psychological Research*, 14(2), 93-118. <https://doi.org/10.21500/20112084.20115236>.
- Dunst, C. J. (2021). Family strengths, the circumplex model of family systems, and personal and family functioning: A meta-analysis of the relationship among study measures. *Journal of Behavior, Health & Social Issues*, 13(2), 1-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22201/fesi.20070780e.20072021.20070713.20070782.20077837>.
- Dunst, C. J. (2021). A meta-analytic investigation of the relationships between different dimensions of family strengths and personal and family well-being. *Journal of Family Research*, 33(1), 209-229. <https://doi.org/210.20377/jfr-20578>.
- Dunst, C. J., Serrano, A. M., Mas, J. M., & Espe-Sherwindt, M. (2021). Meta-analysis of the relationships between family strengths and parent, family and child well-being. *European Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 5, Article 5. <https://www.nationalwellbeingsservice.org/volumes/volume-5-2021/volume-2025-article-2025/>.

Research Evidence for the Relationships Between Family and Family Member Strengths and Parent, Family and Child Benefits (Behavior-Based Evidence)

- Dunst, C. J., Jones, T., Johnson, M., Raab, M., & Hamby, D. W. (2011). Role of children's interests in early literacy and language development. *CELLreviews*, 4(5), 1-18.
http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellreviews/cellreviews_v14_n15.pdf
- Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Hamby, D. W. (2012). Effect of interest-based interventions on the social-communicative behavior of young children with autism spectrum disorders. *CELLreviews*, 5(6), 1-10.
http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/cellreviews/cellreviews_v15_n16.pdf
- Raab, M., & Dunst, C. J. (2007). *Influence of child interests on variations in child behavior and functioning*. Winterberry Press.
- Raab, M., Dunst, C. J., & Hamby, D. W. (2013). Relationships between young children's interests and early language learning. *Everyday Child Language Learning Reports, Number 5*, 1-14.
http://www.cecll.org/download/ECLLReport_15_Interests.pdf
- Trivette, C. M., Dunst, C. J., Simkus, A., & Hamby, D. W. (2013). Methods for increasing child participation in everyday learning opportunities. *Everyday Child Language Learning Reports, Number 7*, 1-7.
http://www.cecll.org/download/ECLLReport_7_LearnOps.pdf

Examples of Strengths-Based Practices

- Early (Contingency) Learning Games
- Interests-Based Child Learning Opportunities
- Everyday Child Learning Opportunities
- Community-Based Child Learning Opportunities
- Family Capacity-Building Practices

Early Learning Games

- Early learning games is the way we described response-contingent child learning opportunities to parents and teachers.
- Response-contingent learning refers to environmental arrangements where an interesting or reinforcing event is contingent on a child's production of a behavior to elicit the event
- These types of learning opportunities are described in the literature as response-contingent learning, contingency experiences, operant learning, secondary circular reactions, as well as other terms

Early Learning Games

- This line of applied research was initiated in 1972 at FIPP with young children with significant developmental delays (DQs < 10) and multiple disabilities
- None of the children demonstrated the use of any instrumental behavior to interact with the social or nonsocial environment
- Interventions consisted of environmental arrangements where child behavior resulted in interesting or reinforcing consequences
- Results showed that all of the children demonstrated increased use of behavior to interact with people and objects

Early Learning Games

- A second line of applied research was initiated at FIPP in 1981 based on 10 years of early learning games research and results from response-contingent learning studies of infants and toddlers with and without disabilities
- Results from more than 25 years of research indicated that the benefits of “early learning games” were not limited to child learning but resulted in concomitant changes in child behavior (increased vocalizations, smiling, laughter, general excitement, etc.)
- Observations and monitoring of the children’s parents indicated that there were discernable positive changes in the parents’ and teachers’ behavior and interactions

Early Learning Games Systems Effect Framework

- Child learning, child concomitant behavior, and parent behavior observed during and after the early learning games resulted in the development of a systems effect framework that guided this line of applied research for more than 40 years.
- The framework was used to monitor child and parent or child and teacher behavior during the learning games (first order effects) and when children and their caregivers were not involved in the learning games (second order effects) to determine if there were discernable changes in child and parent (or teacher) behavior beyond child learning

Contrasting Approaches to the Response-Contingent Learning of Young Children with Significant Developmental Delays and Multiple Disabilities

- Randomized controlled design study comparing the relative effectiveness of two contrasting approaches to early contingency learning
- Strengths-based vs. deficit-based approach to early contingency learning
- 71 children with significant developmental delays and multiple disabilities
- Hierarchical linear growth curve modeling was used to measure child learning over the course of 8 weeks of intervention

Raab, M., Dunst, C. J., & Hamby, D. W. (2017). Efficacy trial of contrasting approaches to the response-contingent learning of young children with significant developmental delays and multiple disabilities. *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 7(1), 12-28.

Characteristics of the Children at Entry into the Study

Background Characteristics	Strength-Based Group		Deficit-Based Group		<i>t</i> -test	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen's <i>d</i> Effect Size
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Chronological Age (months)	17.61	12.57	17.36	8.70	0.95	.924	.02
Developmental Age (months)	4.56	2.99	4.41	2.46	0.23	.817	.06
Developmental Quotient	36.33	26.23	30.48	18.69	1.09	.282	.31

Contrasting Types of Intervention

Strengths-Based Practices

An investigator-developed checklist was used to record the occurrence and frequency of child behavior, including, but not limited to, head, body, arm, leg, fist, and hand movements; vocalizations; and directed gaze and visual fixation. Behavior that a child produced frequently or for considerable durations of time were selected as intervention targets, none of which were used intentionally to interact with the social or nonsocial environment.

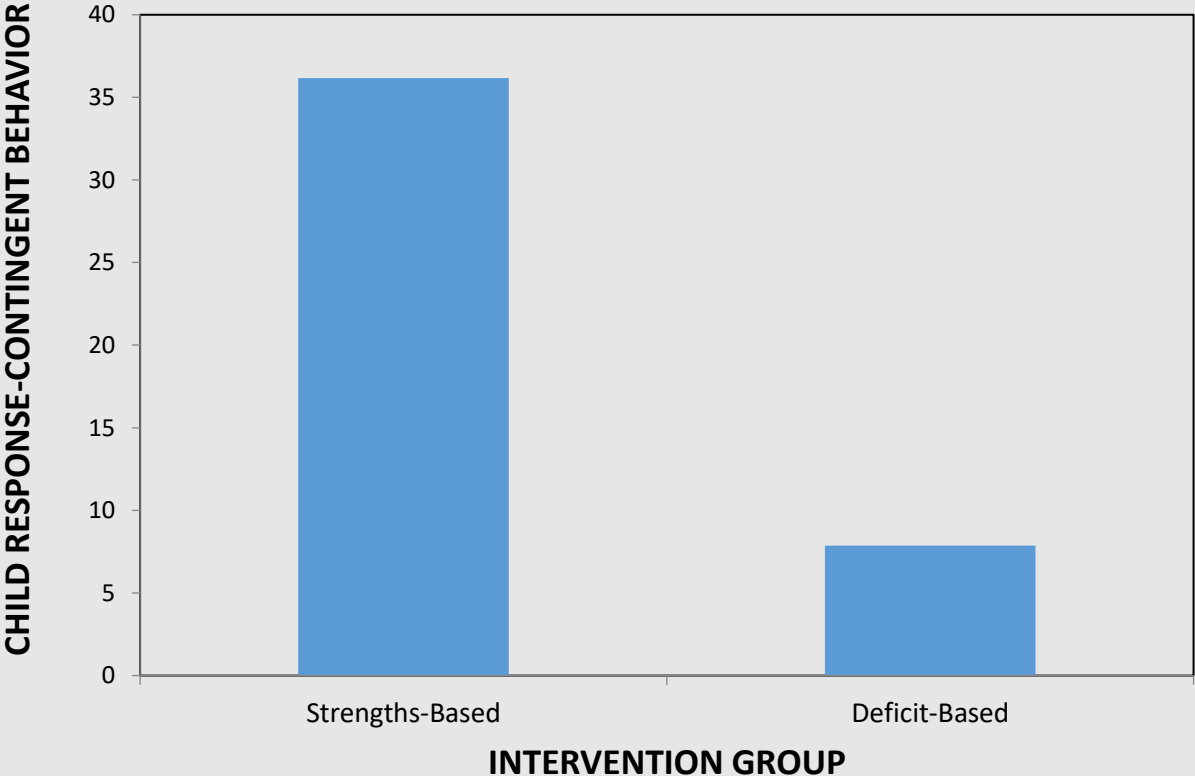
Deficit-Based Practices

The children in the deficit-based group were administered the birth to 3-year-old *Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming Systems Scales* to identify missing skills operationalized as behavior at or just above the ceiling level in each domain on the scale. Results were used to select different child behavior in each domain as the intervention targets.

Response-Contingent Learning Games

- The same types of response-contingent learning games for children in both intervention groups were used to promote the children's use of targeted behavior to elicit or produce interesting or reinforcing consequences.
 - Learning games included behavior that either resulted in reinforcing consequences (e.g., swiping at a mobile to produce movement or sound) or were reinforced by a caregiver (e.g., an adult talking to a child each time he or she looked at the adult's face).
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Average Number of Behavior Per Game



Value-Added Benefits of Strengths-Based Early Learning Games

After just 8 weeks of intervention, the strengths-based group outperformed the deficit-based group in terms of:

- Number of learning games played with the children
- Number of child behavior used to produce reinforcing consequences
- Number of response-contingent behavior per game
- Child social-affective behavior demonstrated during the learning games
- Parent social and verbal behavior demonstrated during the learning games
- Child social behavior demonstrated while not playing the learning games
- Parent social and verbal behavior with his or her child when not playing the games
- Increased positive parent-child interactions
- Parents' increased efforts to engage their children in other learning activities and experience

These as well as other outcomes illustrate the value-added benefits of early learning games

Interest-Based Everyday Child Learning Opportunities in Family and Community Activities

- More than a dozen studies and projects have examined the value-added benefits of child participation in everyday family and community activities
- Research findings from these studies and projects have shown that interest-based child participation in everyday activities not only benefit young children but the parents and other caregivers who engage the children in the activities

Contrasting Types of Interventions for Engaging Children in Everyday Learning Activities

Purpose: Compare the relative effectiveness of interest-based everyday learning vs. non interest-based everyday child learning.

Study Participants: 50 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with identified disabilities living in six United States. The children were randomly assigned to the two different intervention groups at the six different research sites, three for each intervention group.

Outcome Measure: Developmental Observation Checklist Scales (Language, Cognitive, Motor, Social). Child developmental age was used as the dependent measure for evaluating intervention effects.

Methodology: Linear growth curve modeling was used to estimate child progress associated with the two types of intervention.

Contrasting Types of Intervention

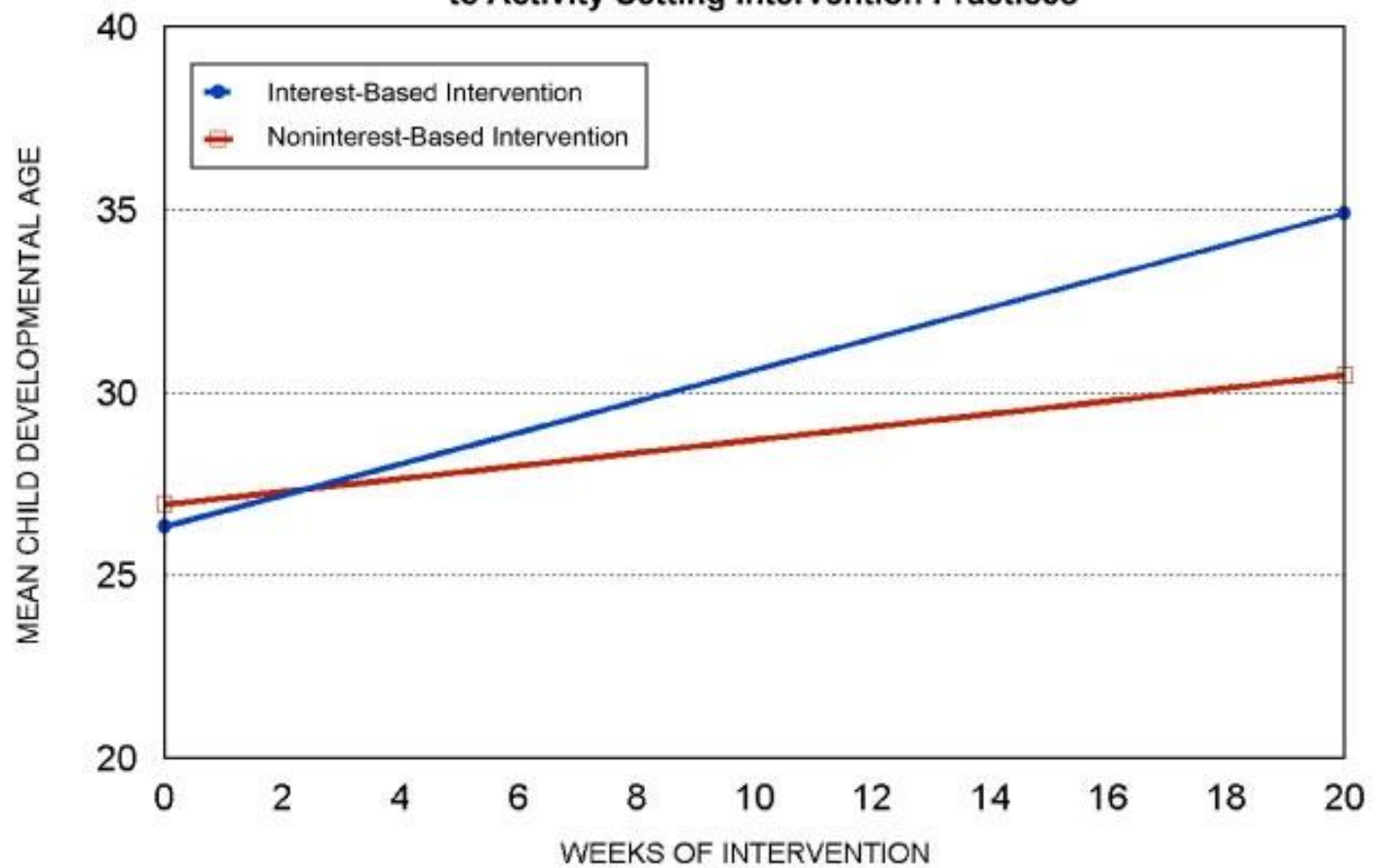
Interest-Based Practices

Parents first identified their children's *personal interests* and the people, materials, and events that their children found *situationally interesting*. These interests were used to select everyday activity settings that occurred on a regular basis and which provided the children interest-based learning opportunities.

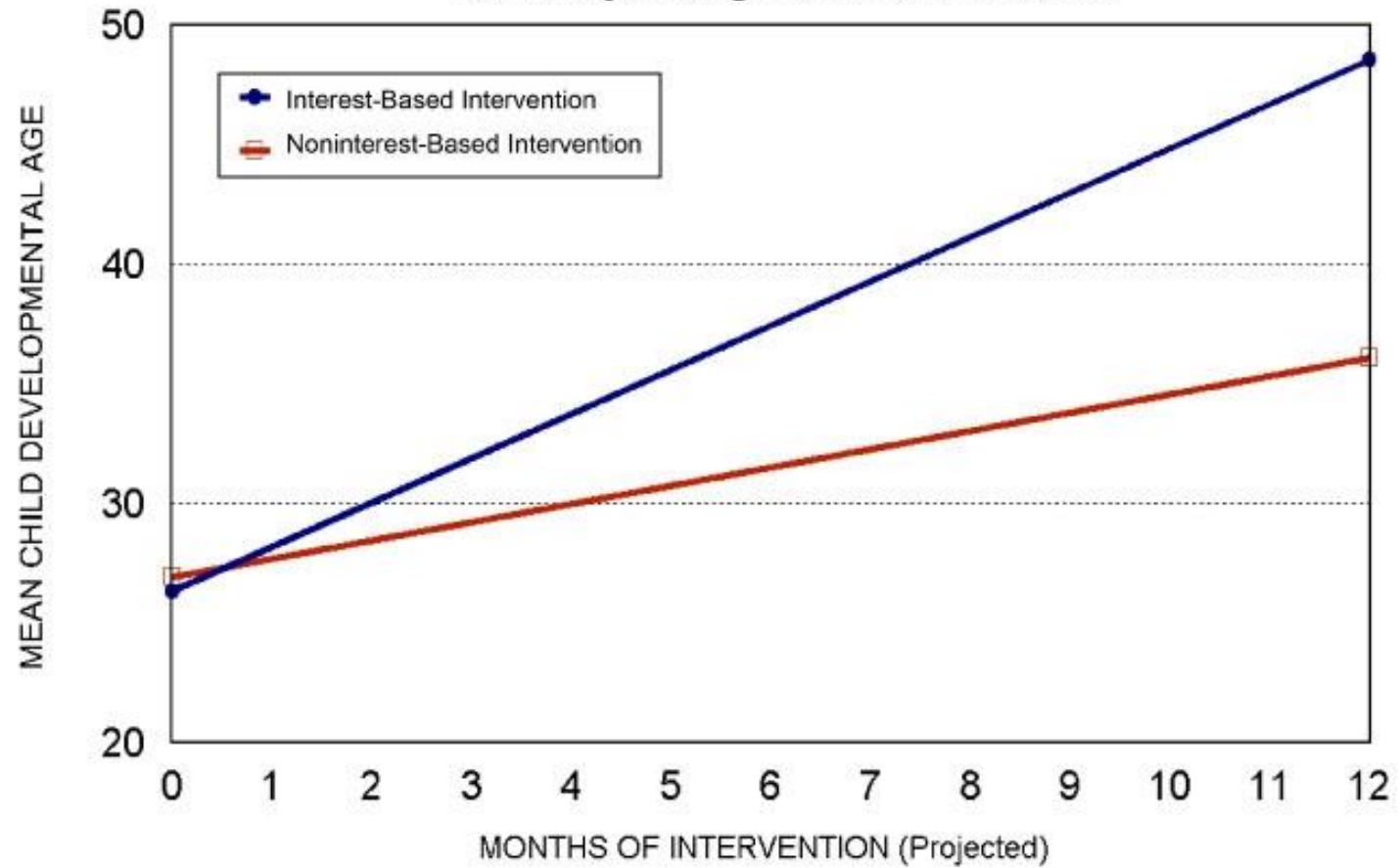
Non-Interest-Based Practices

Parents first identified the behavior they *wanted their children to learn*. They then identified the everyday activities that were best suited for their children to learn the *parent-identified behavior* and increased their children's participation in the everyday activities.

Relative Effectiveness of Two Contrasting Approaches to Activity Setting Intervention Practices



Projected Benefits of Two Contrasting Approaches to Activity Setting Intervention Practices



Types of Child Interests

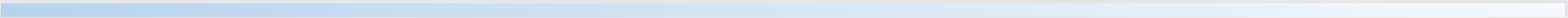
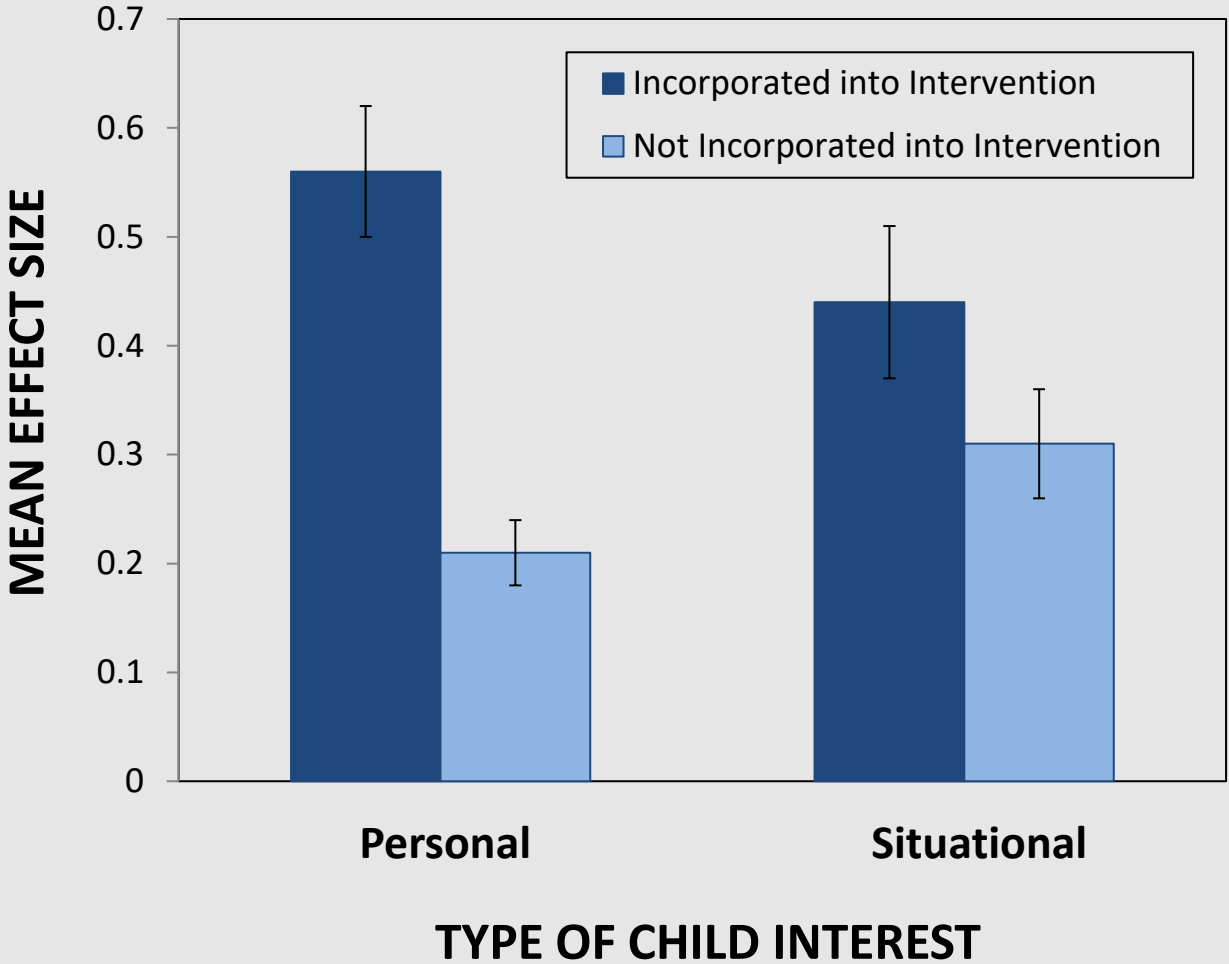
- ***Personal Interests***

Personal interests include the likes, preferences, choices, desires, etc. of a child that influence participation or engagement in different activities, events, or behavior

- ***Situational Interests***

Situational interests refer to the “interestingness” of people, objects, and events that gain and maintain a child’s attention, and that “draws” the child into engagement or participation in activities

Average Effect Sizes and 95% Confidence Intervals for Incorporating or Not Incorporating Interests Into Everyday Child Learning Opportunities



Value-Added Benefits of Interest-Based Everyday Child Learning

- Increased child participation in family and community activities
- Active child engagement while involved in the everyday activities
- Greater gains in child development (cognitive, language, etc.)
- Increased positive social interactions with children and adults
- Increased use of communication and language behavior (both during the everyday activities and in other family and community activities)
- More positive expressions of enjoyment and mastery (sense of competence and confidence)

Family Capacity-Building Strengths-Based Practices

- The ways in which practitioners encourage and support parents and other caregivers to engage young children in interest-based everyday learning activities ***matters a great deal*** in terms of both child and parent benefits
- Practitioner use of family-centered capacity-building practices to encourage and support parents' use of interest-based child learning has been found to have a host of value-added benefits to the parents
- Family-centered capacity-building practices build on existing parent strengths and provide opportunities to develop new strengths

Caregiver Confidence and Competence Associated with the Use of Interest-Based Child Learning Intervention Practices

Purpose: Determine the extent to which the use of caregiver-mediated everyday child learning was associated with improvements in caregiver skills, competence, and confidence

Study Participants: Three mothers and one grandmother of preschool aged children with disabilities or developmental delays

Outcomes: Measures of parenting behavior (skills) and parenting self-efficacy beliefs (confidence and competence)

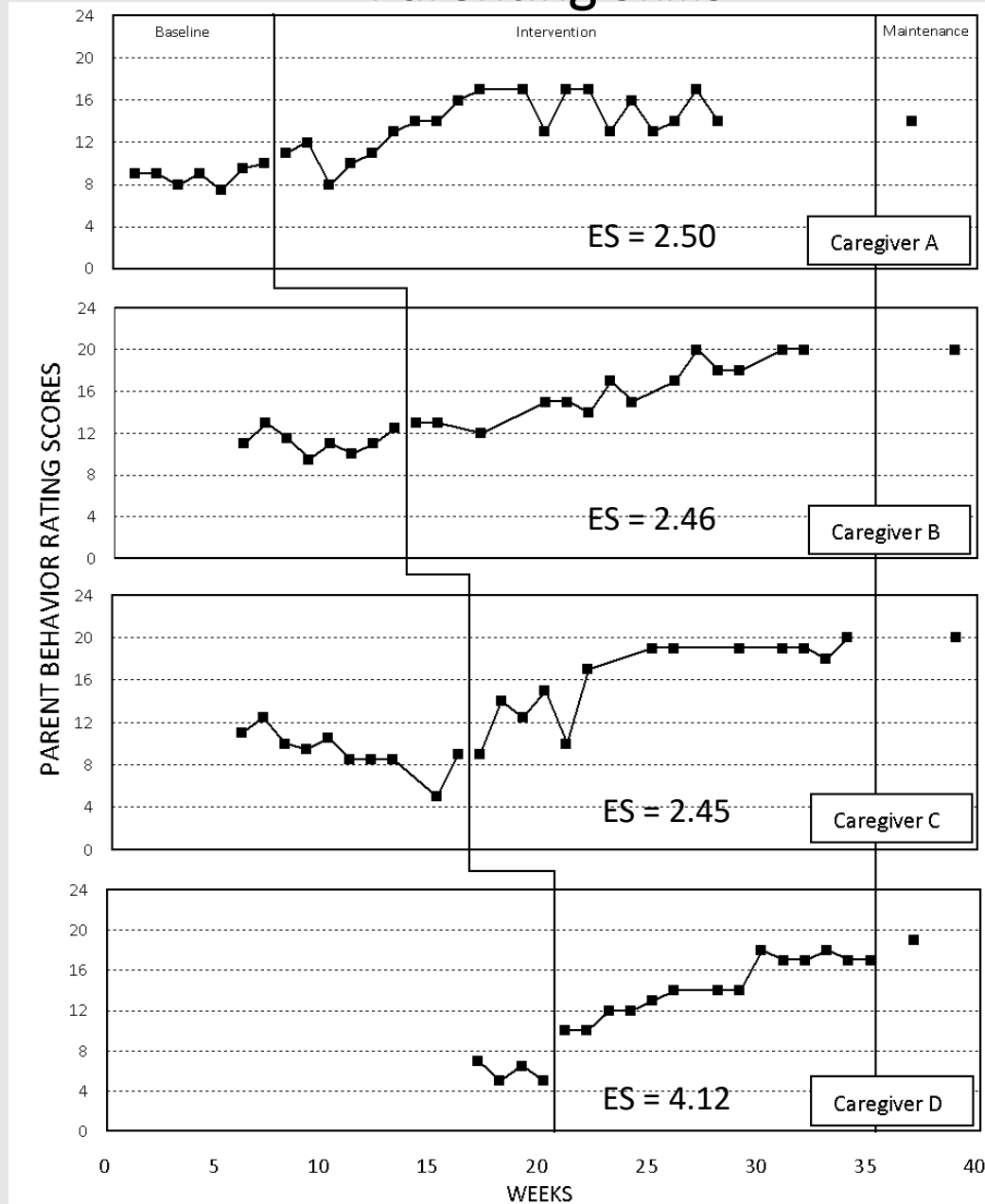
Methodology: Multiple baseline design across study participants

Swanson, J., Raab, M., & Dunst, C.J. (2011). Strengthening family capacity to provide young children everyday natural learning opportunities. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 9(1), 66-80.

Caregiver-Mediated Early Childhood Intervention Practices

- The study participants used child interest-based everyday activities as sources of everyday child learning opportunities where the participants supported and encouraged child learning in the activities using responsive teaching procedures.
- Participants identified their children's interests, the everyday activities that were sources of interest-based learning opportunities, and the caregiver behavior (responsive teaching) used to sustain child engagement in interest-based everyday child learning.
- An early childhood practitioner used family capacity-building practices and participatory parenting experiences and opportunities to support and encourage the caregivers' use of the responsive teaching practices to promote child learning in the interest-based everyday activities.

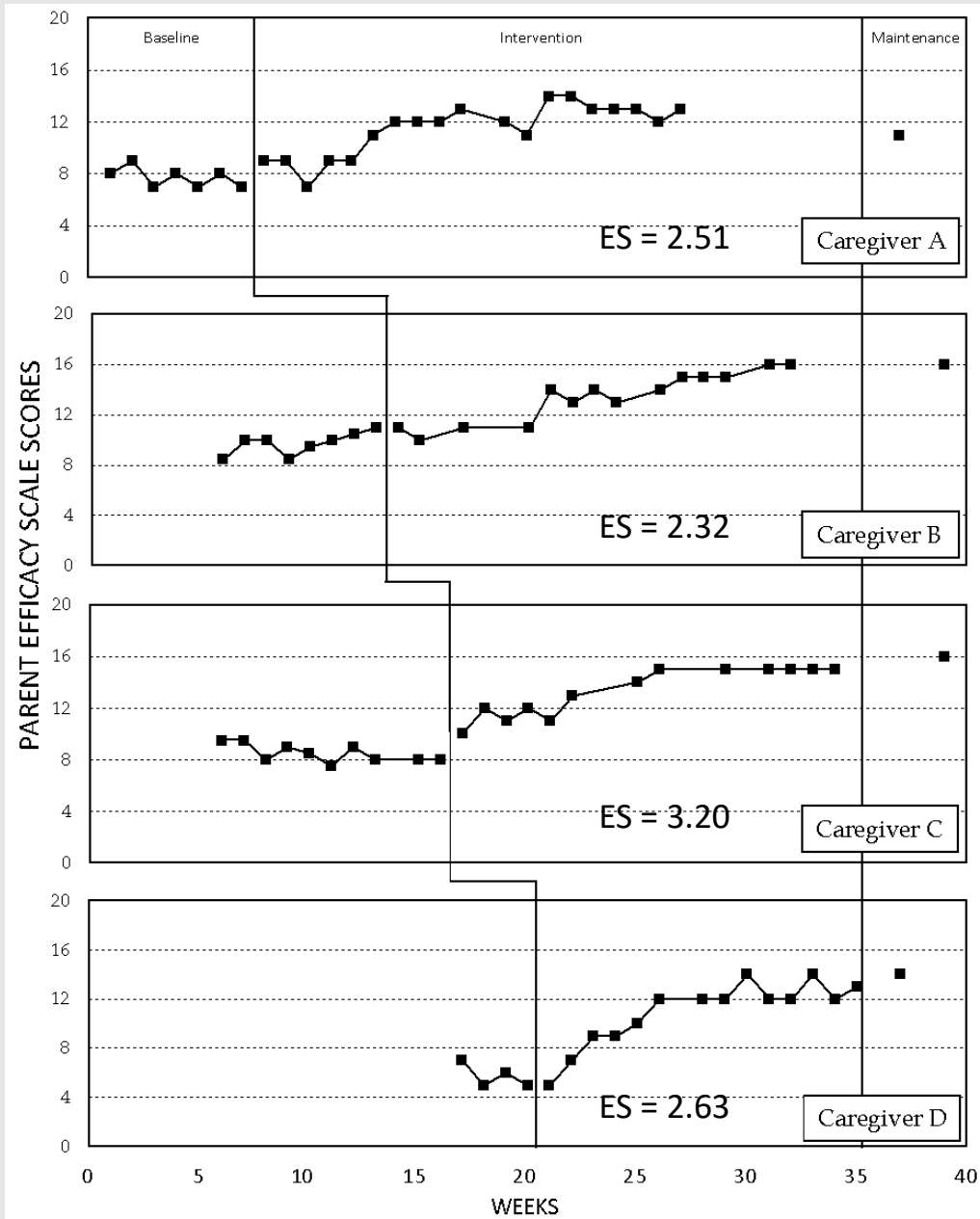
Parenting Skills



Adoption and use of everyday activities as sources of interest-based child learning opportunities strengthened and promoted parents' skills in using the natural learning environment practices

(NOTE. ES = Estimated Cohen's *d* effect size for the baseline vs. intervention phase differences)

Parenting Confidence and Competence



Findings also showed that promoting caregivers' use of everyday activities as sources of interest-based child learning opportunities had the effect of strengthening parenting self-efficacy competence and confidence beliefs

(NOTE. ES = Estimated Cohen's *d* effect size for the baseline vs. intervention phase differences)

Value-Added Benefits of Family Capacity-Building Practices

- Parents' increased efforts to engage their children in different kinds of everyday learning activities
- Parents' increased use of child personal and situational interests as the foundation for child participation in everyday activities
- Parents' increased use of development-enhancing practices (e.g., responsive teaching) to promote child learning in interest-based activities
- Parents' use of their own interests and competencies as sources of child everyday learning
- Parents' sense of confidence and competence with regard to their role in promoting child learning
- More positive parent-child interactions and less negative interactions

Final Thoughts and Comments

- Use of strengths-based practices requires a paradigm shift in how early childhood intervention is conceptualized and operationalized (e.g., strengths-based vs. deficit-based)
- One has to learn to avoid “thought processes” that argue against the use of strengths-based approaches and practices (“Yes, but...” responses)
- Avoiding dismissive responses (“I don’t believe those data”) or proposing alternative explanations (“reinterpreting data”) for the value-added benefits of strengths-based evidence

Additional information about strengths-based practices can found at:
www.puckett.org