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# Preliminary Evidence for Conscious Discipline's Parenting Education Curriculum

Prepared by



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# Contents

Executive Summary .....	i
Introduction .....	1
Background .....	1
Box 1. Key CD Terms Used in This Report .....	2
Purpose of this report .....	3
Methods .....	3
Recruitment and participants .....	3
Data collection instruments .....	4
Data analysis .....	4
Results .....	5
Preliminary evidence for the value of CD PEC .....	5
Parent attitudes, knowledge, and practices .....	5
Parenting experiences and behaviors .....	6
Children’s behaviors and emotion management .....	8
Parent/teacher relationships and home-school connection .....	9
Experiences Implementing and Participating in CD PEC .....	10
Motivations for selecting or participating in CD PEC .....	10
Anticipated benefits for parents and children .....	11
CD PEC training and preparation .....	11
Parent engagement in CD PEC .....	12
Supports and challenges to implementation .....	13
Helpful and unhelpful CD PEC skills for parents .....	14
Degree to which CD PEC met participants’ expectations .....	15
Benefits of CD PEC on the Head Start program and classrooms .....	15
Suggestions and feedback about the curriculum .....	16
Fidelity of CD PEC delivery by sites .....	17
Limitations .....	17
Conclusions .....	18
References .....	18

# Executive Summary

In the spring and summer of 2018, Child Trends conducted a descriptive study of Conscious Discipline's (CD) Parenting Education Curriculum (CD PEC),<sup>1</sup> the parenting component of CD's widely used social and emotional learning program. The study explored the following:

- CD PEC's association with improved parenting skills, parent-child relationships, and child behavior and emotion management
- Programs' and parents' experiences with CD PEC implementation
- Whether programs were implementing CD PEC with fidelity

## Methods

Data collection included two site visits (during the first and last weeks of implementation) to four Head Start programs implementing CD PEC.<sup>2</sup> To assess changes in parenting attitudes and perceptions, parents ( $n=25$ ) completed the Attentive Parenting Survey (APS)<sup>3</sup> during both visits. Additionally, the research team interviewed 19 parents during the site visits—and again six to eight weeks following the end of the parenting classes—about their experiences with CD PEC, their children's behavior, and their parenting. The team also conducted interviews with four Head Start program directors, five CD PEC trainers affiliated with the Head Start programs, and 11 teachers of the children whose parents attended the series.<sup>4</sup>

## Key findings

### *Outcomes for children and families*

- **Parents reported improved parenting knowledge and skills following completion of CD PEC.** Fourteen of the 49 items on the APS showed statistically significant improvements following the seven-week class. For example, parents reported being less likely to raise their voices when frustrated with their children, more likely to encourage their children to share their feelings, and less likely to report feeling overwhelmed by parenting responsibilities.
- **Following participation in CD PEC classes, parents reported improvements in how they responded to their children's challenging behaviors and in how they managed their own (adult) emotions.** Nearly three-quarters of parents ( $n=14$ ) provided one or more examples of how they were responding differently to challenges with their children's behavior after the intervention. For example, many parents reported trying to stay calm or to communicate with their children instead of punishing them. Specifically, more than half of parents ( $n=10$ ) reported improvements in regulating their own emotions (e.g., taking deep breaths and remaining calm, thinking about how best to respond before acting, not yelling). Nearly half of the parents ( $n=8$ ) reported improvements in communicating with their children (e.g., taking time to talk about the child's behavior, using more positive wording).
- **Parents increasingly reported using CD PEC skills and strategies to address children's challenging behaviors.** Over time, more parents reported using Conscious Discipline strategies and skills in response to a challenge with their children's behavior ( $n=3$  at Pre,  $n=9$  at Post 1,  $n=11$  at Post 2). Six to eight weeks after the intervention, parents expanded their use of CD PEC skills and strategies. More parents reported using more of the CD PEC strategies and skills. The most frequently reported CD skills and strategies reported at Post 2 were breathing ( $n=13$ ), offering two positive choices ( $n=9$ ), and promoting parent-child connection through *I Love You Rituals*<sup>5</sup> ( $n=8$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> This study focused on the parent nights mode of content delivery. The curriculum also offers options for home visiting and "mini-sessions."

<sup>2</sup> Each of these Head Start programs had also been implementing the general CD curriculum for at least a year.

<sup>3</sup> The Incredible Years®. (2013) Attentive Parenting Survey. <http://www.incredibleyears.com/for-researchers/measures/>

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this report, we use the term Pre to refer to data collected at the start of the CD PEC series, Post 1 to refer to data collected as the series was ending, and Post 2 to refer to data collected six to eight weeks after the end of the series. i

<sup>5</sup> I Love You Rituals are interactive songs and poems with hand motions designed to strengthen adult-child relationships, build self-esteem, facilitate language development, and teach children how to be kind and caring using gentle touches. ii

# Introduction

## Background

Age-appropriate social and emotional skills, such as managing peer relationships and regulating emotions (McClelland et al., 2017; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012), are keys to school readiness in young children. The quality of adult-child relationships, including relationships with the parent or primary caregiver and early childcare providers, is an important factor in the development of socialemotional skills and the prevention of behavior problems. Parent-child relationships characterized by negative and intense emotionality (such as yelling) are more likely to reinforce, rather than discourage, behavior problems (Scarmella & Leve, 2004).

[Conscious Discipline](#) (CD) is a research-based social-emotional learning (SEL) program that seeks to promote behavior change in children by first changing how adults understand and manage their own behaviors and emotions. By teaching adults better self-regulation skills and more positive ways to respond to the emotion behind a child's behavior, CD prepares adults to effectively respond to children's behavior. It also teaches adults how they can teach children self-regulation skills. CD's focus on self-regulation promotes responsibility for one's own emotions and behaviors. The curriculum emphasizes strengthened connections between adults and children, rather than focusing narrowly on the child's behavioral compliance.

CD's multidisciplinary "[Brain State Model](#)" serves as the framework for the CD program. Instead of focusing on changing children's behavior, CD explains the internal brain state behind the behavior (i.e., survival, emotional, and executive states) and teaches skills and strategies to adults that they can use to calm themselves or soothe the child. This returns both to the optimal state for learning, problem solving, and relating to others.

Recently, CD expanded its school-based general curriculum by creating the complementary Parent Education Curriculum (PEC). CD PEC aims to positively impact children's social-emotional development by teaching parents and primary caregivers how to recognize and moderate their own emotions. Studies have shown that increasing parental empathy and promoting consistent, sensitive, and developmentally appropriate discipline strengthens the parent-child connection and results in fewer behavior problems (Stern, Borelli, & Smiley, 2015; Scaramella & Leve, 2004). CD PEC seeks to positively shift caregivers' perceptions and attitudes toward parenting, as well as increase parents' own understanding of how their actions influence—either positively or negatively—their child's emotional state and response to discipline. CD PEC also strengthens the connections between home and school by teaching parents the same skills and strategies that adults use with children in the school context.

The core CD PEC consists of eight class sessions, including a foundational open house to introduce parents to the content, followed by seven skill-based parent nights, each focused on one of the seven core CD powers and skills. In addition, CD PEC includes the option for four interactive home visits that reinforce selected [powers](#) and [skills](#), and 12 mini-sessions intended to provide opportunities for parents to practice what they are learning. Box 1, page 2, details CD-specific terminology used throughout this report.

## Box 1. Key CD Terms Used in This Report

### Conscious Discipline Powers

- The seven CD powers (**Perception, Unity, Attention, Free Will, Acceptance, Love, and Intention**) describe the optimal state of awareness and emotional intelligence on the part of the adult. The CD powers help adults override impulsive and reactive tendencies and become more conscious, present, attuned, and responsive to the needs of children and others.

### Conscious Discipline Skills

- **Assertiveness:** The skill of Assertiveness encourages parents to clearly communicate with their child and focus on what they want the child to do—not what they do *not* want them to do. For example, say “Walk” instead of “Don’t run.”
- **Choices:** The skill of Choices promotes offering two positive, viable choices to reduce power struggles. For example, when upset, a parent may offer a child the choice of finding a quiet space to calm down alone or sitting on an adult’s lap.
- **Composure:** The skill of Composure promotes self-regulation. CD PEC encourages parents to calm themselves when upset so they can better respond to their child and model self-regulation behaviors.
- **Consequences:** The skill of Consequences encourages parents to allow their child to experience the results of their choices (when safe to do so) as a motivation for learning. Instead of preventing children from feeling discomfort from the results of their choice or imposing an additional consequence, CD PEC encourages parents to allow that discomfort and then help their children learn from their mistakes.
- **Empathy:** The skill of Empathy encourages parents to listen to and accept how their child is feeling. Parents then help children identify their emotions, which helps the child learn to manage their own emotions.
- **Encouragement:** The skill of Encouragement teaches parents to give their child helpful direction by focusing on a specific skill their child is exhibiting and describing what they did without judging the quality of the child’s work. For example, CD PEC teaches parents to say, “You did it! You wrote your name,” instead of, “Nice job writing your name!”
- **Positive Intent:** The skill of Positive Intent encourages parents to attribute positive motives to their child’s behavior. Instead of punishing a child, CD PEC encourages parents to teach their children what would be a more appropriate behavior.

### Conscious Discipline Strategies (used across the range of CD skills)

- **Breathing:** This strategy promotes Composure and self-regulation in parents and children. CD uses the phrase “Be a S.T.A.R. (Smile, Take a deep breath, And Relax)” to encourage deep breathing.
- **I Love You Rituals:** This strategy includes interactive songs and fingerplays designed to promote and strengthen adult-child relationships and connection, build self-esteem, facilitate language development, and teach children how to be kind and caring using gentle touches.
- **Routines:** This strategy provides predictability and consistency to children, helping them anticipate what comes next throughout the course of their day. Specifically, CD encourages the use of visual routines that allow children to think and act by following a picture guide, rather than just verbal or written instructions. This helps children clearly understand and recall what is expected of them.
- **Safe Place:** This strategy helps children practice Composure. A Safe Place is a location in which adults invite children to calm themselves (either alone or accompanied by a friend or adult) when they feel upset. A Safe Place is not a time-out, which is a punishment and does not promote permanent behavior change.

## Purpose of this Report

This report summarizes the findings from Child Trends' mixed-methods descriptive study, designed to investigate how CD PEC influences parenting skills, the utility of CD PEC from the perspectives of program staff and parents, and the fidelity of curriculum implementation<sup>6</sup>. Specifically we sought to answer the following questions:

- Is CD PEC related to changes in parenting skills, parent-child relationships, and child behavior and self-regulation?
- What were programs' and parents' experiences participating in CD PEC?
- Were new users of CD PEC able to implement the curriculum with fidelity?

## Methods

This mixed-methods study involved interviews with program staff and parents participating in CD PEC, questionnaires completed by parents participating in the classes, and observations of program staff facilitating the training. The research team collected data at three time points: prior to the start of the CD PEC class series ("Pre"), immediately after the last class ("Post 1"), and six to eight weeks after the last session ("Post 2").<sup>7</sup> We provide more details about each of these types of data below, as well as details regarding participant recruitment, data collection, and analyses.

## Recruitment and participants

We sought to include Head Start programs that had already implemented the CD classroom-based curriculum for at least a year, had recovered training on CD PEC, were planning to begin implementation of CD PEC in Spring 2018, and were serving children ages 3-4. We selected programs for recruitment from CD's customer database and contacted them via telephone calls to leadership and family support staff. Our final sample included four Head Start programs that met our inclusion criteria: three in the Midwest and one in the West.

Within each participating program, directors decided which CD PEC trainers and teachers would take part in the interviews. We asked all parents who were present when the parent questionnaires were administered to complete them. Program staff helped recruit parents for interviews by distributing fliers provided by the research team or by asking parents directly. The research team selected up to six parents per site for interviews from those who expressed interest.<sup>8</sup>

The research team completed interviews with four program directors, four trainers, and 11 teachers. We interviewed directors once, after CD PEC classes (Post 1). We interviewed trainers and teacher both before (Pre) and after CD PEC classes (Post 1). All teachers who took part in the interviews had students whose parents were taking part in the CD PEC class series. A total of 25 parents completed questionnaires at both Pre (five to 17 parents per site) and Post 1 (four to nine parents per site). Nineteen of those 25 parents completed interviews at all three time points. See Exhibit 1 for details.

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<sup>6</sup> The study, funded by Conscious Discipline, was also conducted to build research evidence needed to satisfy Office of Head Start (OHS) requirements for programs to use evidence-based parenting interventions,<sup>6</sup> and to support a request for recognition in OHS's [Compendium of Parenting Interventions](#).

<sup>7</sup> Due to scheduling challenges, data collection at one site began on week two of the class series.

<sup>8</sup> When more than six parents expressed interest, the research team selected six participants at random to participate in interviews. When fewer than six expressed interest, the research team recruited all of them for the study.

Exhibit 1: Total Number of Participants by Respondent and Time Point

Respondent	Pre	Post 1	Post 2
Directors	N/A	4	N/A
Trainers	4	5	N/A
Teachers	11	11	N/A
Parents (surveyed) <sup>9</sup>	39	26*	N/A
Parents (interviewed)**	21	19	19

N/A indicates that the research team did not intend to collect data at this timepoint.

\*One parent who was interviewed completed the survey only during Post 1, so results below reflect the 25 individuals who completed both Pre and Post 1 questionnaires.

\*\*Parents who completed interviews were a subset of those who completed Pre and Post 1 surveys.

### Data collection instruments

Below, we describe the tools used for the observations, interviews, and questionnaires (copies are included in a separate *Supplemental Materials* file). All programs administered the curriculum in English and all data collection activities took place in English.

*Parent surveys.* To assess changes in parenting attitudes and perceptions, parents completed the Attentive Parenting Survey (APS; see Supplemental Materials [Appendix A](#)).<sup>10</sup>

*Staff and parent interviews.* The research team developed staff and parent interview protocols to explore CD-related experiences, perceptions, and implementation (see Supplemental Materials [Appendices B-F](#) for the protocols). The research team conducted the Pre and Post 1 interviews in person and the Post 2 interviews by telephone.<sup>11</sup>

*Fidelity observations.* Each program conducted all seven skill-focused parent classes. Three of the four sites held classes weekly, for seven weeks; the fourth site held classes twice weekly. To assess the fidelity of implementation, a CD-certified instructor observed the first or second session and the last session and rated fidelity using a rubric created by CD (see Supplemental Materials [Appendix G](#)).<sup>12</sup> Using this rubric, the observer assessed three dimensions of fidelity: use of CD *materials*, presentation of CD *content*, and *facilitation* skills. For each dimension, observers rated trainers on a series of 8–16 items (e.g., having necessary materials, introducing content accurately, modeling CD principles while facilitating), using a three-point scale ranging from met completely (2), to partially (1), to not at all (0). Trainers received copies of their ratings at the end of each observed session.

### Data analysis

#### Survey data analysis

We used paired sample t-tests to compare Pre and Post 1 responses for each individual question on the APS survey.

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<sup>9</sup> Note: The retention rate for surveys was 64.1% at Post 1 (25/38). The retention rate for interviews was 90.4%, both immediately after the intervention (Post 1) and six to eight weeks after the intervention (Post 2).

<sup>10</sup> The Incredible Years®. (2013) Attentive Parenting Survey. <http://www.incredibleyears.com/for-researchers/measures/>.

<sup>11</sup> All interviewees received \$25 gift cards as incentives at each time point, except directors, who received a single \$200 gift card for their center.

<sup>12</sup> CD developed this rubric for this study.

### *Qualitative data analysis*

We used a thematic-analysis to analyze the interview data. The research team developed a coding scheme based on question topics from the interview protocols. Reliable<sup>13</sup> coders applied the coding scheme to interview transcriptions using *Dedoose*, a qualitative analytic software package. The codes included identification of common themes (e.g., the type of responses parents had to challenges with their children [e.g., hugging/holding their children, or yelling], changes in children’s behaviors at home [e.g., reduced frequencies of tantrums], and staff impressions about improvements in parent engagement [e.g., more frequent parent-teacher discussions about children’s behavior]). Below we report totals by theme, site, and type of respondent.

### *Fidelity observation data analysis*

Within each dimension on the Fidelity Rubric (materials, content, and facilitation), we created three percentages by totaling individual item scores<sup>14</sup> and dividing them by the number of possible points in the dimension. We also calculated a total percentage by dividing the total score by the total possible points across all dimensions. We define fidelity as reaching 75 percent of the total possible points on each dimension and on the total score combined.

## **Results**

Below, we first present the preliminary evidence of the link between CD PEC and reported changes in parent behavior, parenting skills and knowledge, child behavior, and parent-teacher relationships. Next, we discuss programs’ experiences with implementing CD PEC and other findings from interviews with directors, teachers, trainers, and parents. Last, we present the results of the fidelity observations.

### **Preliminary evidence for the value of CD PEC**

A primary purpose of this study was to explore changes in parents’ behaviors and parenting skills— as well as child behavior—following parents’ participation in CD PEC. We also looked at whether there were improvements in parent-teacher communication about children’s social-emotional development.

#### **Parent attitudes, knowledge, and practices**

During the postintervention interviews (Post 1 and Post 2), researchers asked parents to share what CD PEC classes had taught them about themselves, their children, and the Head Start programs their children attended. Parents ( $n=19$ ) shared the following:

- Based on what they had learned, some parents articulated a desire to improve how they handled emotions generally or as an aspect of their parenting, citing the need to be calmer and less reactive ( $n=6$ ) or less harsh and restrictive ( $n=7$ ).
- Some parents shared specific action steps they had learned, such as connecting and engaging more with their children ( $n=6$ ) or being more assertive ( $n=4$ ).
- Parents mentioned setting parenting goals following the classes. These included practicing empathy by acknowledging and letting their children express their feelings ( $n=10$ ); keeping their own composure ( $n=10$ ); trying new parenting approaches ( $n=5$ ); and avoiding the use of punitive measures such as yelling, screaming, or physical discipline ( $n=3$ ).

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<sup>13</sup> To demonstrate reliability, team members applied the coding scheme to interview excerpts selected and master-coded by a team lead. Team members had to achieve a Kappa coefficient score for code application that was >80%.

<sup>14</sup> We excluded a few items from these totals that CD described as “Optional” or deemed of low-importance . Excluded items included four items from the materials section (primarily curriculum materials such as CD music or books) and one item from the facilitation section (i.e., whether the facilitator mentioned the CD-website).

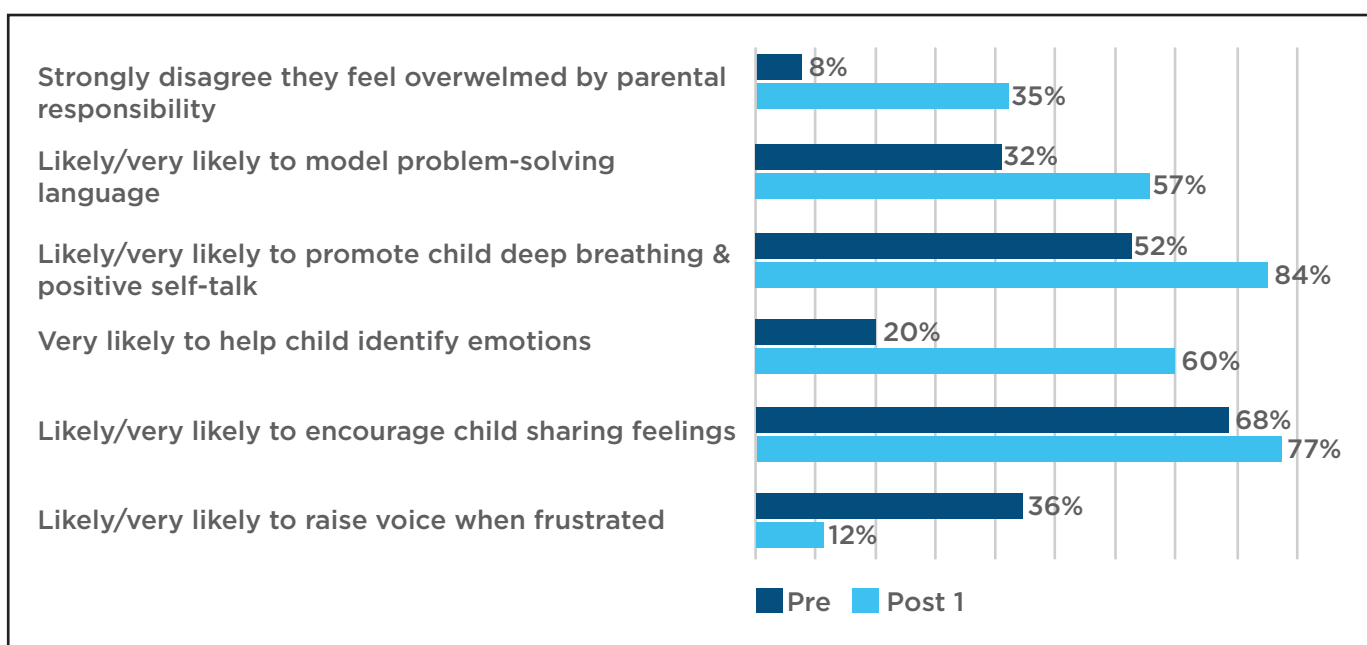


Parents also shared that they had gained a better understanding of their children ( $n=7$ ). Some parents commented that they always knew their children had the potential to be better behaved, but their previous parenting approach was not helping their children maximize this potential ( $n=5$ ). Six parents reported that they now had a greater understanding of the CD strategies and skills being used in their children’s school.

**Survey results.** As described in the Methods section, we asked all parents participating in the classes to complete a survey (the Incredible Years Attentive Parenting Survey [APS]) during the first and last class. Results below are from the 25 parents across the four sites who completed both Pre and Post 1 assessments. Of the 49 items on the APS, parent reports showed statistically significant improvements on 14 items. There were no changes from Pre to Post 1 on the remaining 35 items. See [Appendix H](#) for full results.

Exhibit 2 illustrates the changes on the most relevant items that changed significantly from Pre to Post 1. Relevance was determined by examining the alignment of the APS survey items with CD PEC core content, goals, and objectives. Broadly, after taking CD PEC classes, parents reported being less overwhelmed by parenting, more likely to provide emotional supports to their child, and more likely to take a more supportive (vs. punitive) approach to discipline.

*Exhibit 2: Parenting Survey Results Before and After (Pre and Post 1) CD PEC Class Series*

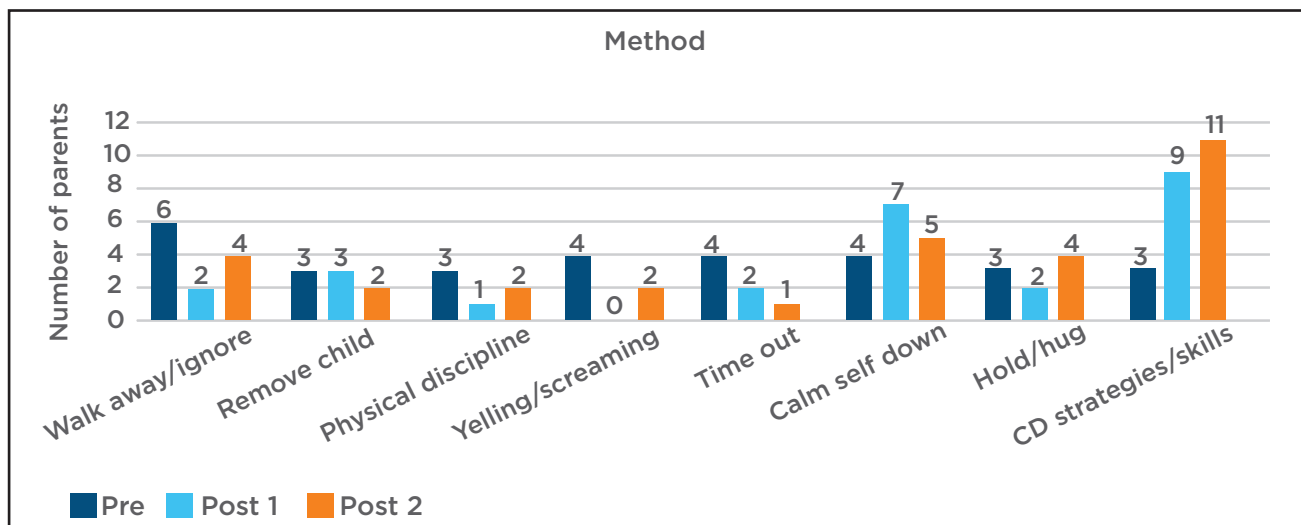


### Parenting experiences and behaviors

At each time point, interviewers asked parents to recall recent challenges with their child’s behavior. Parents most commonly struggled with children’s tantrums ( $n=12$ ), refusal to listen to or obey the parent ( $n=9$ ), aggressive or rough behavior ( $n=7$ ), and power struggles ( $n=5$ ).

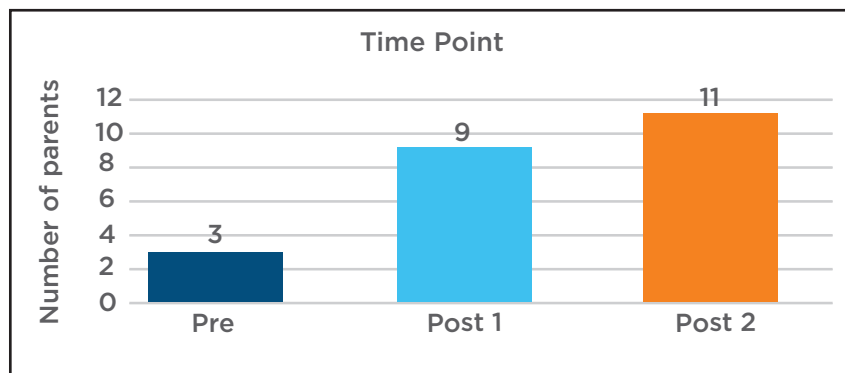
Interviewers asked parents how they typically responded to challenging situations and behavior problems with their children. Very few mentioned using punitive methods (e.g., removal, physical discipline, or yelling) at any time point, but self-report of those types of responses did decrease between Pre and Post 2 (see Exhibit 3). Among the 19 interviewees, the number of parents who reported making efforts to calm themselves down or promote connection with their children increased slightly. The number of parents reporting using CD-specific skills and strategies nearly quadrupled. There were large improvements from Pre to Post 1, but improvements continued to grow over the two months after the classes ended.

Exhibit 3. Number of Parents Reporting Each Method Used in Response to a Challenge with Their Child



Researchers also questioned parents about whether they had tried any new strategies with their children since taking part in CD PEC. Nearly three-quarters ( $n=14$ ) indicated trying something new or responding differently to children's behaviors. In fact, more parents at each time point reported using one or more CD strategies and skills specifically in response to a challenge with their children's behavior ( $n=3$  at Pre,  $n=9$  at Post 1,  $n=11$  at Post 2; see Exhibit 4).

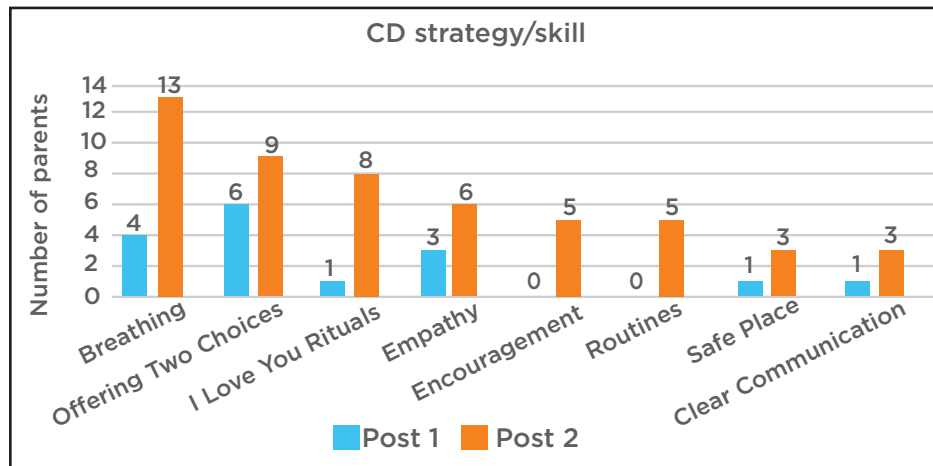
Exhibit 4. Number of Parents Using CD Strategies/Skills in Response to a Challenge with Their Child



Between Post 1 and Post 2, parents increasingly reported consistent use of specific CD skills and strategies (see Exhibit 5). For instance, the number of parents who reported using breathing techniques more than tripled and the number of parents who mentioned their efforts to express empathy for their children's feelings and behaviors doubled. While only one parent mentioned promoting connection using *I Love You Rituals* during Post 1, almost half of the parents interviewed at Post 2 mentioned using them. Additionally, parents reported using some additional new skills or strategies during Post 2 that were not mentioned at Post 1. Specifically, four to five parents mentioned using routines<sup>15</sup> or offering encouragement to their child six to eight weeks after the intervention.

<sup>15</sup> CD PEC teaches parents the benefits to children of having a routine and encourages adults to convey those routines using pictures or drawings. Respondents did not always mention using the visual format at home, but expressed that they valued and were applying the general concept of having consistent routines (e.g., at mealtime or bedtime) with their children throughout the day.

Exhibit 5. Number of Parents Reporting Use of Specific CD Skills and Strategies after the Class Series



*“I used to be a junkie. Now I’m a year sober and still re-teaching myself how to not lash out, so it did actually teach me how to breathe and communicate with my kids better and help them understand how to ... and teach them while I’m teaching myself, so, it did help.” ~ Parent*

Parents were also asked more generally about any positive changes that had occurred since participating in the intervention. More than half ( $n=10$ ) reported positive changes in regulating their own emotions (e.g., taking deep breaths and remaining calm; thinking about how best to respond before acting; not yelling), and nearly half ( $n=8$ ) reported positive changes in their skills in communicating with their children (e.g., taking time to talk to their children about their behavior; using more positive wording). Similarly, when parents were asked how they responded to challenging situations with their children, they reported trying to calm themselves down before responding to their children’s behavior ( $n=4$  Pre and  $n=9$  at either Post 1 and Post 2).

In addition to parent self-reports, interviewers asked Head Start staff about any positive changes they noticed in parents. All directors ( $n=4$ ) and most of the trainers ( $n=3$ ) interviewed after the intervention reported a belief that parents who took the classes were demonstrating comprehension and application of CD skills and strategies. Four teachers also shared examples of how they had noticed parents taking ownership of CD principles or strategies.

*“I think that the mom is more focused on the breathing techniques and ways to calm without yelling, those type of emotions that were coming out before.” ~Teacher*

*“The parents that are involved have said nothing but great things. One of our parents that [took the classes] is one of our most needy families and we have seen such an improvement in her overall attitude and her feelings towards being able to communicate better and more appropriately.” ~Director*

## Children's behaviors and emotion management

In the interviews, parents were asked about how their children handled general frustrations and emotion management. As noted above, the most common behavioral challenges parents experienced with their children were crying, yelling and screaming, and throwing a tantrum or fit. A few parents also reported examples of their children's competencies in managing emotions (e.g., the ability to identify or explain their feelings).

Parents reported the following when asked about their children's behavior across time points, as well as any changes in how children handled their frustrations and managed their emotions:

- More than four-fifths ( $n=16$ ) reported at least one specific example of a positive change in their children's behavior after completing CD PEC classes. The most frequently reported changes included children being able to better identify and communicate their emotions ( $n=9$ ) and being better at calming down or handling their emotions (e.g., breathing with the parent, listening to the parent more, calming down faster) ( $n=9$ ).
- About one-third of parents ( $n=7$ ) reported that their children showed fewer behavioral issues (e.g., less crying, and fewer tantrums), and three-quarters ( $n=14$ ) reported overall positive changes across the two later time points.

*“ CD benefits both child and parent. It's not a one-way thing. It's not just to teach the children how to behave. It's not just teaching the parent how to behave. It's really working together and creating that bond. And I really like that about this class. I like that. ” ~Parent*

Several parents ( $n=11$ ) attributed some or all of the positive changes to their recent efforts to help their children cope with emotions and manage unwanted behaviors. Parents often credited CD PEC classes for inspiring their efforts to try new strategies and skills.

The teachers and trainers interviewed responded similarly to parents. They observed increases in children's self-regulation ( $n=3$ ) and improved behavior ( $n=2$ ), as well as general improvement ( $n=3$ ) among the children of parents enrolled in the classes.

## Parent/teacher relationships and home-school connection

The research team explored whether parents believed that attending CD PEC classes affected the relationships among parents and teachers. At the beginning of the class series, most of the 19 parents and some teachers reported a positive or strong relationship with one another. Specifically, most parents ( $n=14$ ) believed they held similar views as the teachers regarding the best way to support children's development, learning, behavior, and discipline. Although teachers reported having positive relationships with parents overall, only 4 of 11 teachers felt they held similar views as parents regarding care and education of their students; the remaining seven teachers reported that attitudes varied greatly by family.

While both parents and teachers reported positive relationships prior to the class series, teachers and parents noted the following improvements after CD PEC:

- At Post 1 interviews, more than half of the teachers ( $n=7$ ) reported a change in the content of their discussions with parents, including the use of CD-specific language and conversations around CD strategies and skills.
- A handful of parents ( $n=3$ ) and about one-third of teachers ( $n=4$ ) reported a positive change in the home-school connection, including the sharing of activities between home and school, and greater understanding of CD and the benefit of using it consistently across the two settings.

## Experiences Implementing and Participating in CD PEC

### Motivations for selecting or participating in CD PEC

Researchers asked directors, trainers, teachers, and parents how they had learned about CD PEC, their reasons for selecting or participating in the curriculum, and whether they expected any specific challenges or benefits as a result of their participation.

Program directors and trainers reported that they had initially learned about CD PEC through their exposure to the CD general curriculum or information from an external professional conference. Programs reported various reasons for selecting CD PEC instead of other curricula.

- Directors and trainers in all four programs reported that they had selected CD PEC based on their success with implementing CD general curriculum in classrooms, and to promote a consistent approach between school and home.
- Directors at three of the four sites reported that their program selected CD PEC to meet Head Start Program and Performance Standards (HSPPS).
- Trainers at three of the four sites reported that their program selected CD PEC to help parents understand child development.
- Directors and trainers at two sites also mentioned that they valued CD PEC's focus on adults' social and emotional state and self-regulation skills, and that parents in their program had specifically asked for supports around social-emotional and behavioral issues.

Many teachers shared that they were not well-informed about the parenting curriculum selection or implementation process. Teachers were not able to attend the CD PEC classes, and almost all reported wanting more information about who was presenting the content and what was included in CD PEC (not realizing that it was exactly parallel to the CD general curriculum).

Prior to taking the classes (Pre), interviewers asked parents ( $n=21$ ) for their reasons for attending the classes and what they hoped to learn. Parents provided the following reasons for participating:

- 1) Learn more about child development and behavior, including the basics of social and emotional development, how to help children deal with emotions, and how to handle different behavioral situations ( $n=18$ ).
- 2) Learn new skills and get parenting help to “do the right thing” ( $n=17$ ).
- 3) Learn how to be less harsh (including being less strict, yelling less, or using less corporal punishment) and get better at controlling themselves or managing their own emotions ( $n=12$ ). Three of the 12 parents who listed this reason specified that they wanted to learn a parenting style different than the style(s) used by their own parents.

“ I was doing as I was taught: yell, scream right back at them when they threw a fit. But with these classes, it helped me compose myself to, “Okay, stay calm”. You can't really think when you're not calm. Once you get calm, you can actually think about how to handle the situation. And the kids, they mimic how they see their parents act. ” ~Parent

- 4) Learn how to apply the Head Start program's discipline and behavior strategies at home and generally become more involved in the school ( $n=9$ ).
- 5) Become closer to or gain a better relationship with their child ( $n=5$ ).

### **Anticipated benefits for parents and children**

Both before and after the classes, the research team asked all program staff (i.e., directors, trainers and teachers) what benefits they expected to see as a result of offering CD PEC. About half of the program staff ( $n=12$  of 20) hoped the curriculum would offer new and more positive tools and strategies to help parents, as well as increase parents' understanding of the school program. Thirteen staff members hoped that CD PEC would promote more consistency for children between the classroom and home life. Seven mentioned the potential benefit of boosting parent involvement and engagement. Regarding potential benefits to children specifically, 12 staff members thought they might see improved social-emotional skills or self-regulation if the parents applied CD at home.

*“ I'm glad that [CD PEC] is [happening] here because these families live in a very heightened sense of mindset of safety, and they're living by the moment. And I think that this could really benefit them. ” ~ HS Program Trainer*

### **CD PEC training and preparation**

Sites varied in the amount and type of CD PEC training that staff received prior to implementation. Staff ( $n=4$  directors, 4 trainers) at all four sites verified that their lead trainer had at least one full day of CD PEC-specific training. The format of the training differed across sites and staff members. For example, five staff members reported attending trainings led by certified CD instructors; one trainer and a director mentioned using the CD PEC book for self-study, and many staff members mentioned drawing on their CD general curriculum experiences to bolster CD PEC materials.

When interviewers asked directors and trainers whether they felt adequately prepared to implement the curriculum, five responded “yes,” two responded “no,” and two provided mixed responses. Respondents gave several reasons for not feeling adequately prepared: Some would have liked more guidance on following the curriculum, others felt the need to develop more confidence in engaging an audience, and some wished they had been given more time to practice.

Staff who reported mixed responses mentioned needing more practice and regular professional development refreshers throughout the year to feel adequately prepared.

Additionally, some staff members mentioned a need for more formal CD-sponsored PEC training events; when offered, there were not enough spaces available for all staff to attend. One staff member who received one day of training stated that this time was too short.

In Pre and Post 1 interviews, interviewers asked trainers and one director about their approach to preparing for CD PEC implementation. Three trainers reported extensive preparation, including review of the CD PEC manual, creating PowerPoint slides, and viewing webinars and other resources on the CD website. All five trainers described preparing for their trainings by practicing and familiarizing themselves with the curriculum and reviewing the materials.

Two trainers reported involving program family advocates and a family service director to assist them with their preparation. Two staff members that mentioned that, although preparation was necessary, it did not feel burdensome. Among those who responded, the amount of time preparing for implementation varied. For instance, one trainer reported spending three hours per lesson on preparation.

## Parent Engagement in CD PEC

*Parent recruitment.* Directors and trainers used several approaches to recruit parents for the PEC classes. These included distributing flyers, making phone calls, talking with parents in person, and asking all staff (not just family advocates) to inform parents about the classes. One site addressed a potential barrier to parent attendance by providing transportation to those interested.

*Parent enrollment and attendance.* Staff in three out of four sites reported that their expectations for enrollment were not met. One trainer mentioned that attendance varied from session to session, and that enrollment should have been higher based on the total number of families involved in the Head Start program. Trainers from another site stated that enrollment started high, with 18 families participating in the first session, but declined over time. Staff attributed this decline to the burden on families from the class schedule (twice-weekly sessions).

In contrast, the fourth site reported that its enrollment expectations were met. Staff members at this site were surprised by the level of commitment from some families following the conclusion of the school year; even though classes for their children had ended, these families were still willing to travel a good distance to attend the parenting classes each week.

Researchers also asked parents about their attendance at CD PEC sessions. Four of 19 parents reported attending all sessions and the open house, and one parent reported attending all sessions but did not mention the open house. Eight parents reported missing one class, four reported missing two classes, and three reported missing three classes.<sup>16</sup>

*Trainer and parent connection.* Interviewers asked trainers, who often served a dual role as family advocates and liaisons, to describe their connections with parents who participated in trainings. Three of five trainers reported feeling “more connected” to parents following the completion of the class series. Trainers from two sites described building trust and creating an atmosphere in which parents felt comfortable sharing and asking questions. One trainer noted the importance of having consistent trainers throughout the entire training series to facilitate greater trust with families. Three trainers noted the importance of following CD PEC as intended, and described using the CD greeting apron<sup>17</sup> and putting forth a genuine effort to build connections. Additionally, one trainer reported bringing personal experiences and examples into the trainings to build connections. This trainer enthusiastically described how CD worked in her personal situations at home. The trainer felt that sharing these experiences enhanced the connection. During Post 1, interviewers asked parents to provide their thoughts on CD PEC trainers. The majority of parents responded positively:

- Eighteen parents described the trainers as friendly, easily approachable, and able to provide answers to questions.
- Seventeen parents found the trainers to be knowledgeable about CD PEC content.
- Fifteen parents reported that the trainer communicated in a way the parent could easily understand.

Only one parent shared a negative impression, indicating that the trainer did not always seem prepared (i.e., not knowing the songs).

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<sup>16</sup> We collected too little information about which sessions parents missed to explore the relation between attendance and parents' self-reported outcomes

<sup>17</sup> The greeting apron is a prop that gives class members choices of images indicating how they would like to be greeted (e.g., a hug, a high-five, a handshake, or another image for which a playful greeting can be made up to go with the picture).

“ A parent came in and said, “I’m just coming in to check on him because I don’t want anybody babying him and letting him get away with behaviors just because his mom passed away.” I said, “He can handle upset. Let me tell you.” So I shared experiences with him about how his child has not only learned the skill for himself, but is using his skills to teach other children in the classroom those skills. Then I asked, “So tell me, about these skills that he’s using here at school, how long do you think those are gonna last?” And he goes, “He can use those the rest of his life.” I go, “Exactly. And I appreciate your concern thinking that we might overcompensate his loss, but it’s okay that he has these feelings, it’s good that he feels that and identifies with it, and then we can teach him how to handle that.” Then he got it.” ~Trainer

#### *General parent engagement in PEC*

In Post 1 interviews, all five trainers and one director provided their thoughts on parent engagement. Staff from all four sites reported that all parents participated in class discussions and activities, albeit at different levels of engagement based on comfort levels. For instance, three trainers noted that parents were easily engaged, and that parent participation notably improved by the end of the series. Similarly, one trainer mentioned that parent engagement was initially difficult, but that parents became more involved once they were assigned tasks (e.g., helping with handouts, leading weekly commitments to learn new things). Trainers reported that parents asked questions and were open to learning new parenting strategies, and one noted that the class was a “judgment free zone.”

“ I think it got a lot better as we helped the parents just to connect with each other. For example, with the I Love You Rituals, it was neat to see how at first, they were secluded in their own little corners, and towards the end, they were hugging each other and before I left on my vacation, all of them came and hugged me and they were so sad I wasn’t going to be there. So, it was validation for me but also validation for them, for each other, to build that connection.” ~Trainer

#### **Supports and challenges to implementation**

Interviewers asked directors and trainers to identify factors that supported their implementation of CD PEC, as well as factors that made implementation challenging. All directors and trainers found that the materials and resources provided by CD were the most helpful factors. Participants felt that the CD PEC book was a comprehensive resource for planning classes and that, when questions arose, they could look at CD’s online materials (including the example videos) for more information. Two trainers and two directors from three of the four sites also found the CD-provided trainings to be useful in preparing to implement CD PEC. Trainers from all four sites and two of four directors also identified various forms of assistance from center staff as a helpful support to implementation.

Logistics was the largest source of implementation challenges. All four directors, and trainers at two of the four sites, reported low parent attendance. Staff from each site reported that scheduling a time that worked for all parents was a challenge. Staff from two different sites found that providing childcare was important



for implementation, and shared problems that occurred when childcare was not provided. Specifically, one trainer reported that having a child in the CD PEC class was a large distraction to parents, and one director reported that parents were less likely to attend if the program did not provide childcare. Trainers and directors at two sites felt that having the class series at the end of the school year was difficult because it was a busy time for the programs.

One of these sites used an accelerated timeframe (seven sessions over three and a half weeks) to ensure that they finished before the end of the school year.

Trainers and directors from three of the four sites raised an unexpected challenge: Family advocates who shared the responsibility of leading trainings did not feel prepared for their role because they were not used to leading group-based activities. One director felt that the curriculum is meant for teachers to implement, but that programs realistically need family advocates to teach the course to parents; these advocates have less experience teaching and need help gaining confidence to work with groups.

### Helpful and unhelpful CD PEC skills for parents

Researchers gave parents and staff members a list of CD-specific skills and strategies and asked them to indicate which were helpful and not helpful, or which were difficult for parents to learn or use. Exhibit 6 reports their responses. All parents identified at least one specific skill or strategy they found valuable. When asked to identify skills they found not helpful or difficult to use, parents identified very few specific components of CD. In fact, half of the parents and one trainer responded that all of the skills were helpful. Additionally, three parents and one trainer attributed difficulties with applying the skills to their need for more practice, not to the skill being unhelpful.

“ Sometimes you can just keep counting or you just need to take deep breaths. This kind of reminded me of a pregnancy Lamaze class. When you’re around a stressful situation you can handle it better when you’re calm because you can’t handle everybody else and take care of everybody else unless you can take care of yourself first.” ~Parent

Exhibit 6: Parent and Trainer Reports of Utility of Selected CD Skills and Strategies

Skill/Strategy	Present Report (n=19)		Director/Trainer Report (n=5) <sup>18*</sup>	
	Helpful	Not Helpful OR Difficult to Understand	Helpful for Parents	Not Helpful OR Difficult for Parents to Understand
Compusure	15	3	4	1
<i>Breathing</i>	11	1	2	1
<i>Safe Place</i>	1	2	0	0
Choices	14	1	4	3
<i>I Love You Rituals</i>	6	0	0	0
Empathy	6	2	3	1
Positive Intent	6	0	1	2
Consequences	3	1	0	1
Encouragement	3	0	0	0
Assertiveness	1	0	0	1

Note: *Italicized* text refers to CD strategies.

\* We report counts for staff members at the site level because impressions across directors and trainers were generally consistent.

<sup>18</sup> Four trainers and one director (n=5) indicated skills that parents found helpful. Five trainers (n=5) indicated skills that parents found not helpful or difficult.

Several trainers noted that Choices (i.e., offering two positive choices) was difficult for parents to understand. One trainer explained that, while parents understood that both choices should be positive, it was difficult to come up with two positive choices instead of a positive and a negative choice. One of the two parents who found Safe Place unhelpful reported that they had tried using the safe place but, rather than viewing it as a place to calm down, their child viewed it as a punishment.

*“ I would tell them, ‘This is a difficult skill and is gonna take a lot of practicing. I don’t expect you to say, ‘I got this!’ And I gave them the analogy at the very beginning that this is like baseball. ‘People get into the Hall of Fame batting three hundred. That means seven out of ten times, they didn’t get a hit. So when you’re practicing this, you don’t say to yourself, “It doesn’t work.” You say to yourself, “I’m getting back in the batter’s box, I’m gonna try to hit again.”’ I said, “So you keep going back and going back, and you’re an all-star because you stay in the batter’s box. You just don’t look at the times you swung and miss.” And they’re like, “Okay, I got this. I’m not gonna give up. I’m not gonna quit.” ’” ~Trainer*

#### **Degree to which CD PEC met participants’ expectations**

Interviewers asked parents and staff members whether CD PEC had met their pre-program expectations. Fifteen of the 19 parents interviewed after the classes concluded responded that CD PEC had met their expectations, and four parents reported that they had not entered the class with any expectations. No parents reported that CD PEC did not meet their expectations.

All four directors and trainers at three of the four sites reported that CD PEC met their expectations. The trainer at the remaining site reported that, while she thought the curriculum helped parents, it was difficult to track parents’ use of CD and improvement after the course; as a result, she was hesitant to say whether the curriculum was helpful. Three teachers, two trainers, and one director from three of the four sites reported positive changes in parents’ parenting skills, confidence, or self-regulation. Six teachers from four sites verified improvements in the consistency of discipline approaches used between school and home. These teachers also noticed positive changes in the behaviors of the children in their class following CD PEC class series. One teacher reported no changes in children. Another teacher reported that it was hard to track improvement because of the lack of communication from the trainer regarding which parents were taking the classes and what skills they learned at each class.

#### **Benefits of CD PEC on the Head Start program and classrooms**

Head Start staff members attributed a variety of positive changes and benefits to CD PEC, both for the program overall and for classroom environments. One director and two trainers reported that CD PEC

#### **CD PEC increased the program’s CD knowledge, by immersing staff in the process of applying the CD general content in a parent-education context.**

increased the program’s CD knowledge by immersing staff in the process of applying the CD general content in a parent-education context. Related to this, one teacher and two trainers thought that CD PEC expanded awareness and practice of CD throughout the whole program. Other benefits mentioned only once included enhanced parent/teacher relationships, improved consistency in how teachers and parents were managing children’s behavior, and the opportunity—through exploration of CD implementation—to find room for improvement of the program overall.

## Suggestions and feedback about the curriculum

After completing the series, more than half of the parents ( $n=12$  of 19) said they did not have any remaining questions or topics they would have liked to learn more about. Those who did have remaining questions were concerned about how to handle specific examples of their children's behaviors ( $n=6$ ), or wanted help assessing potential developmental issues ( $n=2$ ). Two parents were also curious about the lessons from the sessions they had missed.

All parents ( $n=19$ ) and trainers ( $n=5$ ) interviewed after the intervention said they would recommend, or have already recommended, the CD PEC class series to others.

*“ I would recommend it to everybody that has to deal with children... I mean everybody. Grandpas, grandmas, parents, aunts, whoever, if you're gonna have to deal with children, you ought to sit down and listen to some of this. It will change your attitude.” ~Parent*

All four directors of the Head Start programs said that CD PEC was worth the investment overall, noting the lasting impacts of the upfront materials purchase and training costs. All directors planned to offer the series again in the future, and some even had innovative ideas they wanted to try incorporating into the curriculum. For example, one site suggested arranging “accountability partners” for parents to promote attendance and skills practice. This site also suggested inviting parents who have already attended to serve as ambassadors for future sessions. Other pieces of advice covered logistics, such as holding sessions at the beginning of the school year, engaging parents to spread the word about the classes, and starting on those elements of the curriculum with which programs feel comfortable (e.g., mini sessions) before delivering the full curriculum.

At the end of the series, interviewers asked parents for feedback to improve future class offerings. Their suggestions included the following:

- Provide more materials to take home, highlighting the important role of the curriculum's “make-n-takes”<sup>19</sup> in applying the content ( $n=8$ ).
- Increase the length of classes from an hour to 90 minutes, or extend the series to allow more time on each of the seven topics ( $n=7$ ).
- Offer extra supports for implementation ( $n=4$ ), such as parent support groups or question-and-answer sessions, and provide more in-class practice ( $n=3$ ).

Feedback from program staff ( $n=3$  directors, 4 teachers, 4 trainers) echoed the feedback from parents who attended the series. The most frequently reported staff suggestions were as follows:

- Increase the accessibility of classes to parents ( $n=6$ ), particularly by exploring optimal times to hold the classes.
- Explore ways to support parents in implementing the CD skills and strategies ( $n=4$ ).

As mentioned in the section on experiences implementing and participating in CD PEC, most teachers shared that they knew very little about the curriculum, its implementation in the program, and parent attendance. Programs would benefit from providing more information to teachers about the timing and content of the series, and from leveraging teachers to enhance the home-school connection during and after the series.

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<sup>19</sup> Make-n-takes are short craft activities for parents to complete and use at home, taking what they learned in the classes to the home setting.

## Fidelity of CD PEC delivery by sites

Across dimensions, three of the four sites met the fidelity threshold (i.e., a score of at least 75% on each domain and overall) at week one and increased their scores by week seven. One site improved its content dimension score to meet fidelity at week seven but did not meet fidelity overall due to a low materials score.<sup>20</sup> See Exhibit 7 for detail.

*Exhibit 7: Fidelity of Implementation Scores at Weeks 1 and 7*

	Materials		Content		Facilitation		Total	
	Week 1	Week 7	Week 1	Week 7	Week 1	Week 7	Week 1	Week 7
<b>Site 1</b>	77.27%	90.00%	94.44%	92.86%	88.89%	94.44%	86.21%	92.31%
<b>Site 2</b>	50.00%	36.36%	61.11%	78.57%	81.25%	85.00%	62.96%	64.29%
<b>Site 3</b>	85.00%	100.00%	88.89%	92.86%	88.89%	95.00%	87.50%	96.43%
<b>Site 4</b>	75.00%	100.00%	77.78%	92.86%	88.89%	94.44%	80.36%	96.30%

The experiences of parents enrolled in Site 2 classes did not vary substantially from those of parents from other sites, suggesting that fidelity was high enough for parents to experience benefits.<sup>21</sup> The fact that parents from Site 2 reported similar experiences as those at other sites may also confirm CD's preliminary impressions that the content component of CD PEC and rubric is the most important.

## Limitations

Readers should interpret these findings with caution: They are descriptive in nature and the sample is small. While the results trended very positively, we cannot attribute causality to CD PEC and we cannot know how well these results would generalize to a larger sample. Some program staff attributed low participation to the fact that the classes took place at the end of the school year. In addition, we did not collect information about racial and ethnic demographics of study participants. With respect to methods, some terminology used in the survey and interview protocols may have included vocabulary that was unfamiliar to respondents; parents periodically asked interviewers to explain the meaning of some terms or questions, and transcripts show that interviewers' responses were not always consistent. Finally, there are several limitations related to the use of the fidelity assessment tool used in this study. For example, it is a brand new tool developed by CD that was being piloted as part of this study and the curriculum guide did not make clear which materials were especially important.

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<sup>20</sup> CD considers the content dimension to be the most important component.

<sup>21</sup> Since fidelity observations were only collected on weeks one and seven, and no further information is available.

## Conclusions

This report summarizes a descriptive study that provides preliminary evidence of CD PEC's positive association with improved parenting skills, parent-child relationships, and child behavior and emotion management. Parents and staff in four Head Start programs that implemented CD PEC in spring of 2018 reported consistently positive feedback on the class series. Survey results showed significant improvements in parents' self-reported skills and attitudes, following the conclusion of the seven-week series. During interviews, parents cited numerous examples of their understanding of the CD skills and strategies and reported actively practicing new ways of interacting with and supporting their children. **Notably, six to eight weeks after the intervention, more parents reported consistent usage of many CD skills and strategies than right after classes concluded.**

“*With the classes, I understand him a little bit more; the other day when I came from the class I just went to Walmart and bought a whole bunch of things to make so that we can color, we can do other things. And then my older daughter was like, “Mom, is this because of the class?” I’m like, “Yeah.” I just feel like engaging with them more, with both of them.*” ~Parent

Directors, trainers, and teachers provided corroboration that changes were happening for parents and saw some cases of behavioral improvements among children. After the seven-week intervention, most parents provided evidence of a shift in their perspectives on parenting and dealing with their children's challenging behaviors. Much of the change centered on how parents could first regulate their own reactions before helping their children cope with their emotions, using more positive practices while avoiding punitive actions.

“*Somebody asked me at school: “I see that you’re more happy.” I’m like really? Are you serious? And I said “Well, I’m taking these parenting classes and it’s actually helping me.” And people are noticing that I’m more lenient with [my child] instead of being like ‘hey stop doing that, hey don’t do that, hey stop running.’” I’m not as frustrated anymore; that’s good.*” ~Parent

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