Using a qualitative approach, this study explored how participation in a family literacy program can impact important relationships beyond the targeted parent-child dyad. Interviews with 108 parents, were collected over four program years, 1996-1999, as part of the statewide evaluation of Oregon’s Even Start Family Literacy programs, were analyzed using a systems theory framework. The findings provided support for the theoretical framework, where not only the target parent and child participants’ relationship changed as a result of participation, but also relationship changes with non-participant children, partners, peers, and extended family were reported.

These relationship changes were examined by using the participants’ words to gain greater insight into the types of changes that occurred and the process of that change. Parent’s reported increases in home-based literacy activities with their children and greater knowledge of basic child development, which led to improvements in parent-child interactions. Participant’s also indicated learning effective communication skills and anger management techniques, as well as
discipline strategies that were less punitive. Interviews revealed that some skills learned in Even Start rippled out to their intimate partners as well. Some parents disclosed that Even Start was particularly supportive and helpful in the few instances of oppression and domestic violence. Hispanic participants noted more frequent changes in their intimate relationships, as they were more likely to be partnered. They indicated becoming less dependent on their partners, which led to positive changes in their marital relationships.

Most participants initially indicated being isolated from both family and friends, however participation in Even Start led to expanded social networks. Some participants changed their peer groups as a result of participation. Hispanic participants were especially appreciative of the opportunity to socialize with other parents through participation in Even Start.

The findings offer important implications for future research and practitioners. Even Start appears to be effective in fostering overall family well-being and expanding social networks. Additional investigation using a triangulation of methods is needed to further examine the effectiveness of this program, particularly the parenting classes.
The Ripple Effect: Relationship Changes in the Context of a Family Literacy Program

By

Marina L. Merrill

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I am indebted to many individuals who have made this research possible. First and foremost, this research would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my major professor, Dr. Leslie N. Richards. Her passion for good qualitative research and improving the quality of life for low resource families has greatly influenced me. I am deeply appreciative of her direction, guidance, and time that she put into this project. Moreover, I am appreciative of her faith in me, her sincere enthusiasm for this research, and her friendship.

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Literacy Programs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even Start Family Literacy Programs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon’s Even Start Evaluation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Perspective</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Help Groups</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Groups</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Child Relationship Changes and Beyond</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Literacy Evaluations</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oregon’s Even Start Evaluation</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Protocol</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: RESULTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Changes with Children</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Effective Communication Skills</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning More Effective, Less Punitive Discipline Strategies</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Basic Child Development</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enriching Activities</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Changes with Significant Others</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Partner’s Parenting</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Relationships with Peers and Family</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Changes with Peers</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Participants</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Changes with Extended Family</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS                                     | 79   |

Summary of Findings                                                      | 79   |

- Parent-Child Relationship Changes                                      | 79   |
- Changes in Relationships with Intimate Partners                         | 82   |
- Relationship Changes with Peers                                        | 83   |
- Relationship Changes with Extended Family                              | 84   |

Theoretical Implications                                                 | 84   |

Limitations and Directions for Future Research                           | 85   |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link Between Literature and Research Findings</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Parent Interview Protocol Even Start, 1996</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Parent Interview Protocol Even Start, 1998</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Marital Status by Ethnicity</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Distribution of Children by Age Range</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
That adverse effects of poverty on parental well being, family functioning, and child development are well documented (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Fong-ruey Liaw, & Duncan 1995; Chilman, 1991; Huston & Mc Loyd 1994; Mc Loyd 1998; St. Pierre, Layzer, & Barnes, 1995). Poverty can strain family relationships, leading to spousal conflict, marital dissolution, and spousal and child abuse (Belle, 1982; Garbarino 1977; Huston & McLoyd 1994; Makosky 1982; Mc Loyd 1990; St. Pierre et. al, 1995; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Poor families have to deal with a greater number of daily stresses, which, over time, weakens their ability to manage subsequent stress (Mc Loyd, 1990). The inability to cope or handle stress contributes to poor psychological functioning and this may, in turn, lead to inadequate parenting skills (Makosky, 1982).

High poverty rates have been linked to low levels of educational attainment, low wage earning jobs, and dependence on welfare (Darby, 1996; Epstein, 1997; O’Hare, 1996; Seccombe, 1999; Shaw, 1996). Literacy is a major issue related to poverty. Literacy may be defined as the ability to read, write, speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels where one can function on
the job and in society (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). In the job market literacy has been equated with the level of formal education a person has completed. Not having a high school diploma or the General Educational Development (G.E.D.) has been associated with poverty as well (Darby, 1996; Epstein, 1997; O’Hare, 1996; Seccombe, 1999; Shaw, 1996). Although having a high school, post high school, and even college education does not guarantee getting a high paying job (Seccombe, 1999), educational attainment (or lack thereof) is one of the most significant predictors of poverty.

The poverty rates of high school drop-outs are three times higher than the poverty rates among high school graduates (O’Hare, 1996; Shaw, 1996). The poverty rates for men and women with different levels of educational attainment show a gap that narrows as people go up the educational ladder. In 1994, the poverty rate for men 25 to 54 years of age who did not finish high school was 27% versus 38% for women of similar age who never finished high school. The poverty gap narrows when men and women of the same age have both finished high school (O’Hare, 1996).

Karen Seccombe (1999) argued that it is important to look at the barriers to educational and employment attainment. She cited Nightingale, Yudd, Anderson, and Barnow (1991), who suggested that somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of welfare recipients may have learning disabilities. Seccombe also reasoned that low basic skills may be more common and problematic than other barriers to
employment, such as physical or mental health problems, substance abuse, domestic violence, or involvement with the child welfare system.

There are several interventions designed to address the problems associated with poverty. Primarily, these interventions have focused on either children or on parents, but rarely on both simultaneously. Family literacy programs are an example of one type of social support program that takes a holistic approach to serving low-income families. Family literacy programs focus on the entire family, rather than just the adult, or just the child. They offer comprehensive services including early childhood education, parent education, parenting, and parent and child time together (PACT). The current study examines ways in which Even Start, a federally sponsored family literacy program, can provide a supportive environment conducive to promoting healthy family functioning. In particular, it looks at the ways in which participation in Even Start can lead to relationship changes within and out of the family.

Family Literacy Programs

Until recently, programs aimed at solving the nation's problem of intergenerational cycles of poverty and under-education have been addressed separately, as either remediation programs for adults in the form of adult education or workplace literacy programs, or as prevention programs for children through early childhood education efforts such as Head Start (St. Pierre & Swartz, 1995). Family literacy programs, which focus on the whole family, as opposed to just the
parent or just the child, are relatively new attempts to address the problems of poverty. The first family literacy programs began in the late 70's and early 80's and were predicated on the idea that children's learning is greatly influenced by their parents, and that parents must develop and value their own literacy skills in order to be successful in supporting their children's educational success (St. Pierre & Swartz). The key concept behind family literacy is that parents are their children's first and best teachers.

Family literacy programs were designed in the hopes of creating a strong intergenerational effect, where parents and children simultaneously make gains (St. Pierre et al, 1995). Ramey, Ramey, Gaines, and Blair (1994) argue that studies have demonstrated that single focus approaches have not proved completely successful, and question the premise that adult education programs benefit children. Conversely, early childhood education programs may improve children's cognitive development, but perhaps not as much as when parents also strengthen their parenting skills (St. Pierre et al., 1995). Along the same line, St. Pierre et al. reported that parenting programs may improve parenting skills, but children's development does not improve in a commensurate amount. Neither of these types of programs focus on the need for improved job skills, mental health, or life skills.

Family literacy programs were designed to recognize the multigenerational and multidimensional aspects of family poverty. These programs have been praised for their holistic approach to serving families (Benjamin & Lord, 1996; Hayes, 1996) yet little is known about their effectiveness. St. Pierre et al. (1995)
maintained that family literacy programs have become popular because research has indicated the limitations of the single-focus interventions, rather than documenting the benefits of utilizing a multigenerational approach.

One of the first family literacy programs was the Kentucky Parent and Child Education (PACE) program. In 1988, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust of Chapel Hill provided a substantial grant to develop programs using the model developed in the Kentucky PACE program (Bailey, 1996; Brizius & Foster, 1993; National Center for Family Literacy, 1998). This program became known as the Kenan model. The Kenan Trust was interested in developing a model of family literacy that could be replicated all over the country (National Center for Literacy, 1998). The original PACE model was enhanced and broadened to include more parent/child together time, parent volunteers in their child’s classroom, and career education.

Even Start Family Literacy Programs

Even Start is a federally funded, state administered education program that aims to break the intergenerational cycle of low literacy (Popp, 1998). In 1988, the United States Congress passed Public Law 100-297 to authorize the Even Start Family Literacy program. The purpose of the program is to reach three interconnected goals: (1) to assist parents in becoming partners in their children’s education, (2) to help children reach their full potential as learners, and (3) to provide adult education training for the parents (Brizius & Foster, 1993). Even
Start offers a comprehensive model designed to achieve these goals through the combination of adult education services and early childhood education opportunities for families with children from infancy to age seven. In addition, the program offers families extensive social services to support families in their efforts to improve literacy and job skills.

The Even Start Family Literacy Program was originally authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as amended by the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988 (P.L. 100-297). Congress passed the National Literacy Act in 1991 (P.L. 102-73), which amended Even Start. According to the legislation, the primary goal of Even Start is to break the cycle of poverty by “improving the educational opportunities for adults and children by integrating early childhood education and adult education into a unified program” (P.L. 100 – 297, §1051).

The Federal Register provides federal guidelines for the Even Start Program, which were recently updated (The Federal Register, 2000). The federally mandated regulations at the time the interviews were conducted (The Federal Register, 1994) include the following: (a) a method of recruitment that identifies families most in need of services, (b) a process for screening parents to provide the means for them to fully participate in the program, (c) a method to accommodate the parents’ work schedules and other responsibilities so that they can fully participate in the program, (d) high quality adult education and early childhood education programs, (e) specialized training for all Even Start staff, (f)
home visitation services, (g) a year-round program with services offered in the Summer, (h) coordination with other programs and agencies under the Adult Education Act, (i) a program serving families most in need, and (j) provisions for an evaluation of the program.

In order to be eligible for Even Start, a family must have an adult who is eligible for adult basic education services, and must have a child under the age of eight. (Federal Register, 1994). Although federal regulations currently mandate that the four components identified by the Kenan family literacy model be included in any Even Start program, the model for the delivery of services is left to be determined by the local program (Bailey, 1996; Goodling, 1994). Thus, programs are able to serve the local population most in need of services. This flexibility is consequential because it allows programs to provide the most appropriate services to families.

Even Start targets families that are “most in need” of services in the local community. Too often, this means that Even Start families have extremely poor literacy skills, live disordered lives characterized by multiple stressors and deep poverty, and have little hope of reaching economic self-sufficiency without intensive interventions such as Even Start (Richards, Merrill, Sano, Corson, Graham, & Weber, 2001). Each year 50-60 percent of participants, for example, enter Oregon’s Even Start programs at risk for clinical depression (Richards, Corson, Harrington, Merrill, & Pamulapati 1999).
The majority of Even Start participants in the nation are women between the ages of 20 – 29 years (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). According to the 1998 National Even Start Evaluation Report, 80 percent of families had incomes at or significantly below the federal poverty level. The need for basic literacy skills for parents is also striking. Forty-five percent of 1996-1997 new enrollees only had a 9th grade education before enrolling, and 42 percent had reached 10-12th grades but did not graduate.

Even Start is now serving more families with greater evidence of disadvantage. In particular, the proportion of Hispanic families in Even Start has more than doubled over the past 10 years (Tao, Gamse & Tarr, 1998). The increases in the percentage of Hispanic families have led to increases in the proportion of non-native English speakers, who have different needs for adult literacy education (St. Pierre, Gamse, & Alamprese, 1998).

Oregon’s Even Start Evaluation

Since February of 1995, the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Oregon State University, under the direction of Dr. Leslie Richards, has been conducting the mandated local evaluation of Oregon’s Even Start Family Literacy programs (Richards & Bailey, 1996; Richards, Bailey, Brinkman, & Manoogian-O’Dell, 1996; Richards, 1998; Richards, et al, 1999, Richards, Pamulapati, Corson, & Merrill, 2000). Based on feedback from Even Start staff, it has been the expectation since the beginning of the evaluation that the
changes experienced by many of these families go beyond adult literacy gains to incorporate changes in participant’s mental health, life skills, parenting support network, and knowledge of community resources. It was anticipated that parents would obtain their GED, gain job skills, learn new parenting techniques, become more involved in their child’s education, and increase literacy-based activities in the home. After interviewing participants for several years, some unanticipated outcomes emerged as well. One unanticipated outcome that became apparent early in the evaluation was that individuals consistently reported changes in their relationships with their children, their partners, peers, and even extended family members. For example, some participants reported that their communication skills have improved since they began going to Even Start. This, in turn, has had a positive influence on their marriage. One women interviewed for the 1998 evaluation explained how Even Start has helped her communicate more effectively with her partner:

They make home visits and give us lessons, to my husband and me. It’s to learn to communicate with each other...I like the part where we have the talks, because it helps me to have a better relationship with my husband. It’s made a difference. It helps us relax and the things that have happened we learn to think about it before speaking and acting (Richards, 1998, p. 29).

Other participants reported changes within their peer groups. Some noted that they have a support group for the first time in their lives. Others reported that they have learned the difference between a positive group of friends and friends that only contribute negatively to their lives. Andrea shared how Even Start helped her to break down some of her walls, open up, and begin to trust others:
...cause when I started here I didn't trust anybody and I didn't like anybody, I mean I was nice, I wasn't rude to anybody, but I didn't like anybody and I actually developed friendships here (Richards, et al, 1999, p. 54).

Building on this preliminary evidence, this study will systematically examine relationship changes of Even Start adult participants using interview data collected from four waves of the on-going evaluation of Oregon's Even Start programs. Using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to gain a greater understanding of the nature of intended and unintended changes in social relationships experienced by adult Even Start participants.

Theoretical Perspective

The primary theoretical perspective used for this study will be the General Systems Theory (GST), which focuses on the family system as a whole rather than an examination of the parts individually (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). General Systems Theory views families as interdependent, or as part of a system. For example, each individual's behavior affects each and every other member within the family system. The Even Start program goals exemplify this theoretical perspective by offering services to the entire family. The parents are offered adult basic education, children are provided a quality early childhood education, and parents are taught parenting skills that hopefully will improve parent-child interactions. The program also offers intergenerational activities with extended family members. It is clear that the Even Start model views the family as an interrelated system.
The primary goal of this study is to explore how all the aspects of participation in Even Start create a ripple effect that impacts all significant individuals within the participant's life (i.e. children, spouses, extended family members, peers, etc.). Figure 1.1 illustrates the expected ripple effect of program participation. Using a systems perspective, the subsystem of parent-child relationships occurs within a larger suprasystem (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Even Start is just one example of a suprasystem; it is a time intensive program that requires a great deal of energy of its participants. The parents commit to a minimum of 12 hours per week to the program. Given the amount of time parents spend in the program each week, General Systems Theory would suggest that there will be change within all systems in which the participant manifests mutual influence, whether they be family or peer systems.

**Importance of Study**

Although several studies have examined outcomes of specific family literacy programs, in general, the studies provide little insight into the way these programs transform family relations, because they have focused on only a few outcomes and have used narrowly conceptualized measures (First, & Way, 1995). Typically, evaluation studies focus on observable and quantifiable outcomes for both the children and their parents. Hayes (1996) indicated that evaluation studies on family literacy programs tend to focus on educational accomplishments of the family and pay less attention to complex issues such as parent-child relations or
Figure 1.1 Even Start Ripple Effect Model

Even Start Ripple Effect

Extended Family

Other Kids

Even Start
Parent Child

Significant Other

Peers
emotional well being of participants, perhaps because such issues are more
difficult to study.

A group of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers gathered in the fall
of 1995 to discuss and develop a research agenda for family literacy (Benjamin &
Lord, 1996). Two major themes were stressed and encouraged by Naomi Karp, the
Acting Director of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and
Education (ECI), for producing the research agenda. She emphasized that all
children and families have strengths and that research should be conducted with
and for, not on families. Other participants in the symposium proposed that the
families themselves are an important source of information and can best speak to
what they need and what works for them. “The participants are the real experts,”
said Mercedes Pérez de Colón, of Avance-Hasbro Family Resources Center in San
Antonio. She added, “research will never tell you what participants can.” Indeed,
practitioners reported that they often see the effects on families and individual
program participants that are never measured by researchers.

First and Way (1995) proposed that past research may have excluded
important outcomes by adopting positivistic perspectives aimed at identifying
easily observable outcomes responsive to prediction and control. Researchers and
theorists suggest that more research is needed that utilizes alternative perspectives
such as a qualitative methods approach, which emphasizes the process and
Fine (1989) has also noted that many good and possibly some undesirable occurrences of family life might be missed when we examine outcomes along predetermined lines consistent with the explicit goals of the program. He suggested that a “spread of effects” phenomenon is missed when we focus too intently on the intended consequences of a program (Fine, 1989). Further, Apps (1989) contended that some of the most important learning may be that which has not been anticipated at all.

Although healthy family functioning is a goal of Oregon’s Even Start programs, it is not clearly defined and has not been thoroughly examined. It is important to gain greater knowledge of how participants perceive the way in which their relationships with other individuals in their lives have changed since they joined the program. Since low-income families are highly susceptible to social isolation, and experience many family problems ranging from domestic violence to divorce, it is important to examine how a family literacy program can help families learn to relate to others in a more harmonious way.

Based on the assumptions of systems theory, it is reasonable to believe that a family literacy program can affect relationships within the family and peer groups other than the targeted one between the parent and child. Using a systems theory perspective, this study will address the following questions:

1. What relationship changes between Even Start parents and target children are identified by parents?

2. How do relationship changes between the target parent-child “ripple
out” to other relationships including: other children, partners, other family members, and peers?
Although family literacy has been gaining more attention over the past few years, research studies on family literacy programs have remained limited. Hayes (1996) maintains that research has primarily focused on specific outcome objectives, which are often direct, short-term effects (Hayes, 1996), such as obtaining GED credentials, job skills, economic self-sufficiency, or other direct adult education goals. Family literacy programs, however, are designed to provide a more complex set of services for adults and children and thus are also expected to produce many multifaceted intergenerational changes in families. There is very little research that studies the process of change in these families. Subsequently, examining broader areas of evaluation research can offer important insights into the process of change as a result of program participation. The literatures on self-help groups, and group change in general offer some insight to studying changes in Even Start families.

Self-Help Groups

For years social scientists, particularly psychologists, have been fascinated with studying "people changing" groups. This body of research exploded in the 1970's when self-help groups were rapidly growing in popularity (Lieberman &
Borman, 1979). It was generally hypothesized that self-help groups rose in popularity in response to certain failures in society (Lieberman, 1979; Levy, 1979). On an individual level, the motivation for joining such a group can be based on sharing some condition or affliction, or sharing a similar goal.

Empirical studies have established that most people who report experiencing difficult life experiences do seek help for their problems (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Lieberman, 1979; Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975). The key factors that differentiate people who seek help and those who do not are age, ethnicity, and gender (Lieberman, 1979; Peifer, Hu, & Vega, 2000). Caucasians have been more likely to seek help than minorities, and women tend to seek help more than men. People also tend to seek support from friends and family first and turn to agencies or professionals as a last resort (Booth & Babchuk, 1972; Croog, Lipson, and Levine, 1972; Litman, 1974; Quarantelli, 1960).

Lieberman (1979) maintained that there are some common linkages between certain types of problems and sources of help sought. For general worries, partners are the focal helpers, while friends are the major resource utilized for emotional problems. Professional help is sought for problems ranging from severe emotional distress to work or family role strains.

Some social support characteristics have been linked to help-seeking patterns as well (Lieberman, 1979). The size and proximity, amount of contact with friends and family, provision of economic and emotional support, and the number of reciprocal relationships have been found to predict the use of
professional services. Lieberman hypothesized, based on previous research, that when support networks are of high quality, size, and/or are close in proximity this can affect help seeking by buffering the experience of stress, which prevents the need for professional help. Essentially Lieberman proposed that the type of social support and the condition are both key in whether individuals seek help or not.

Lieberman’s research, however, did not support his hypothesis. His research found that both personal and social resources did not have a major influence on whether or not an individual sought help. Those who chose not to seek help either felt that they could handle the problem themselves or that seeking help was too difficult or shameful. Interestingly, seekers of help were, on average, individuals who had the most social and psychological resources. The author did however, caution the reader that the sampling procedure used was problematic. He pointed out that it is particularly difficult to find appropriate contrast and comparison groups in this kind of research.

Change in Groups

Evaluating change in people participating in programs, therapy, or self-help groups has been and continues to be an important field of study in the social sciences. It is crucial in understanding the effectiveness of interventions, understanding and addressing social problems, as well as providing insight into human development and behavior. Borrowing heavily from psychotherapy theories and research on the process of change, Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973)
developed a list of change mechanisms that they applied to the self-help context utilizing a phenomenological approach. Of particular relevance to the present study, was the evaluation of mothers' self-help groups where the key element in this system was the experience of universality.

The evaluation revealed that mothers' self-help groups represented the purest form of a support-sharing group in which the sole purpose is a normalizing function of the group. Mothers participating in such groups shared an ambivalence towards motherhood. Participants were asked to order items in terms of importance; four of the top-ranked items revealed that the ability to share this inner anxiety in a supportive environment is the key factor in the aid that such groups offer their participants. For example, mothers indicated the following statements to be of particular importance: “meetings give me someplace to go,” “other members in the group give me hope,” “becoming aware of why I behave as I do,” and “being with other women I want to be like.” Yalom (1975) defined this change as “universality,” when members of a group learn that they are not the only ones with these kinds of problems. This is also related to what Yalom defined as, “group cohesiveness,” or not feeling alone any longer. Other change mechanisms in group settings that are of importance according to Yalom are 1) altruism, where participants gain respect for themselves by helping others in the group; 2) catharsis, the ability to vent their problems, while learning how to express themselves; 3) interpersonal learning, where participants learn how they appear to others and gain trust of others; 4) guidance, getting advice from others; 5) family
reenactment, understanding how they grew up in their family; 6) self-understanding, learning some of the causes and sources of their problems; 7) instillation of hope, seeing others making improvements can be inspiring.

Lieberman, Bond, Solow, and Reibstein (1979) examined the impact of a women’s consciousness raising group on marital relationships. Statistical analyses revealed that the women’s group had no impact on women’s ability to communicate more effectively, or decrease marital conflicts. Nearly all women who were initially dissatisfied with their marriage remained dissatisfied at a six-month follow-up. The women’s testimonials, however, painted a different picture. Over half of the married women indicated that they had a greater appreciation or acceptance of their marriage. The most common response was that women felt more trusting and closer to their spouses. The opportunity for comparisons of other women’s marriages provided a new conceptualization of their own marriages. Other women shared that their group helped them become aware of their husbands as individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses. Others reevaluated their roles within the marital relationship, assuming greater responsibility for their own happiness and less dependence on their husbands. Although the women’s stories did not match the statistical data, the authors maintained that some of the women may have adopted new perceptions of their marriages that the scales did not measure.

Although Even Start is not designed to be a “self-help” group, the parenting support component in particular is similar in function and structure to
self-help groups where individuals with common concerns, afflictions, or goals convene to improve their lives in some way. Even Start participants tend to share the same goals and reasons for participating, typically to obtain their GED or learn English and get parenting support (Richards et al, 2001). Even Start parents also share the same affliction of living in poverty and being undereducated. The literature pertaining to self-help groups can provide insight to the process and mechanisms of change in Even Start participants. Moreover, it can help articulate the relationship changes that Even Start participants describe that go beyond the intended consequences of the program.

**Parent-Child Relationship Changes and Beyond**

Parenting and relationship changes are some of the more challenging issues to evaluate. They cannot be easily compartmentalized and adequately addressed in isolation (Powell, 1996). In a review of the literature on parent education, First (1993) found that the majority of studies that examined parenting program outcomes looked at specific behaviors or attitudinal changes in either the parent or the child (Adesso & Lipson, 1981; Bernal, Kinnert, & Schultz, 1980; Mitchell & McManis, 1977; Patterson, Chamberlain, & Reid, 1982; Peed, Roberts, & Forehand, 1977; Wiltz & Patterson, 1974). Most of the studies reviewed looked at the role that parent education had in changing specific behaviors in children. The behavior changes included improved school performance, decreased problems in
parent-child interactions, decreased aggressive behavior, and increased compliance to parents.

First and Way (1995) went beyond examining specific parent or child behavioral changes, attitudes, or beliefs by qualitatively examining outcomes of a specific parent education program. They interviewed eight female program participants to gain an understanding of how participants experienced a parent education program, using the perspectives of the learners to conceptualize the types of learning outcomes that occurred.

The rich interview data illustrated the ways in which parenting education can produce outcomes that extend beyond gains in parenting skills. Participants of the study reported significant changes in aspects of their lives other than parenting. The authors equated this finding to the concept of transformative learning. They explained that the literature on adult education uses the concept of transformative learning “to explain educational experiences that encourage participants to look at things in fundamentally new and different ways and to examine actions they can take to change their lives in essential ways” (p. 106). First and Way (1995) used this concept to frame all seven of the parenting outcome categories in their study. The outcomes that they defined parallel many of the changes that Oregon’s Even Start on-going evaluation has reported in the past as well. Even Start parents and the participants of First and Way’s (1995) study both report that they 1) learn more effective communication skills, such as active listening, 2) become more nurturing, 3) spend more quality time with their children, 4) deal with anger in more positive
ways, 5) feel more confident in their parenting skills, and 6) expand their social network through the program (First & Way, 1995; Richards et al., 2001). Although related, it is clear that these outcomes transcend outcomes solely related to parenting.

First and Way (1995) suggested that parenting programs might in fact transform participants thinking about themselves and their own lives so that they can become more loving parents, and confident motivated individuals. The authors offered that for many of the women in their study, the program was their first experience of sensing any degree of control in their lives. Further, they noted that parents went from feeling unempowered to feeling empowered.

First and Way's research is significant not only because it adds to the body of literature and illustrates the value of utilizing qualitative methods, but it also informs policy and future parenting education programs. For example, they posited that well designed and implemented parenting programs can assist women in developing enhanced feelings about family and self that possibly could lead to such benefits as improved community and work life. This is one example of how programs can also create a ripple effect comparable to the one proposed in this study.

Similarly, studies of work and family life illustrate what Crouter (1984) described as a "spillover effect." The "spillover effect" demonstrates that work exposes individuals to experiences and ideas that influence parenting styles and beliefs. Crouter's (1984) study of the effects of participatory work strategies in a
manufacturing plant on the employee's family roles established that employees involved in decision-making and problem-solving at all levels of the work environment, primarily through small work teams, reported using the "team meeting" concept at home and using communication skills that had been learned during work training sessions. Illustrative of the findings, one father reported that his experiences on the job actually led him to use some of the things he did at work with his son, instead of yelling at him (Crouter, 1984).

It is plausible that the parenting techniques and skills learned in a family literacy program, such as Even Start, may have a similar effect on families. Within the parenting classes they learn to communicate more effectively not only with their children, but also with their peers in the classroom. These new communication skills can then be applied to additional settings and relationships not limited to parent-child interactions.

In fact, Winans and Cooker (1984) argued that based on the assumptions of systems theory, it is reasonable to believe that parent education done in group settings can and may affect other relationships within the family besides the targeted one between the parent and child. Specifically, Winans and Cooker considered the influence a parent-training group might have on the marital dyad. They recruited 20 married couples to participate in a group parent training program, called STEP. Prior to participation in the parenting program, couples were administered the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and a parenting
assessment. They were given the same instruments at the conclusion of the intervention.

Results indicated that parents reported an increase in marital satisfaction despite the fact that the focus of the treatment was on the parent–child interaction. However, the authors noted that there was not a control group and the sample was small. They recommended further research in this area. Likewise, another study found that parents who attended parent education programs had more satisfying marital relationships when they rated themselves as having low marital satisfaction initially (Noller & Taylor, 1989).

In a review of counseling approaches, Levant (1983) found that most programs focused on only one subsystem of the family, typically a dyad (parent-child or partners), and did not take into account the potential effects on other subsystems. Levant (1983) recommended an increase in a family systems perspective as well.

Family Literacy Evaluations

The second national evaluation of Even Start (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) focused on gains in literacy for both children and adults, and found positive results. Parents showed moderate improvement on their Adult Basic Education tests, while children displayed significant improvement in cognitive development. The home environment was evaluated as well, to assess the quality
of emotional support and cognitive stimulation. The results also revealed a modest improvement.

Individualized evaluations also report positive results in regard to the effectiveness of family literacy programs. An evaluation of a family literacy program located at Weber State University (Glover, Jones, Mitchell, & Okey, 1991) found that the participants demonstrated changes in their personal goals and enhanced their academic skills as a result of program participation. Children also showed improvement in a number of areas. Teacher observations indicated that children had an increased interest in books, demonstrated emerging pre-literacy skills, and developed more social skills. The study did not, however, examine changes in close relationships or parenting changes.

The Oklahoma City Public Schools Evaluation Project (1992-1993) did examine parenting practices in Even Start as well as child outcomes, and adult participants' perceptions of the adult education component of the program. The results of the parent interviews indicated that parents felt more confident with their parenting, and more apt to be supportive and positive towards their children. These changes occurred because parents learned better ways to discipline and guide their children, they learned to talk to their children, and learned how to provide more stimulating activities for their children at home. All families indicated that they increased the number of literacy activities in the home environment. Many parents reported that their personal change toward reading affected their entire family. An example of this was presented in the findings, where a mother shared how she
extended the literacy based activities she learned at Even Start to her older non-participant daughter as well. This study provided some evidence of the “ripple effect,” where enhanced literacy skills rippled out to other children in the family, not simply the target child. The parents were also asked to name three things that they had learned to do with their children as a result of home visits. The participants had varied responses. The researchers compiled a list of the most frequent items and the number of parents who listed each response. Ten out of the 29 participants chose “family relationships” as something they learned through the home visitation component of the program. The responses were only listed, therefore it is difficult, and perhaps presumptuous to conclude that this finding provides further documentation of the “ripple effect,” however it is conceivable.

Child participants had positive outcomes as well. The children made considerable gains in social and language development. They learned important self-help and problem solving skills through interactions with their peers. These new abilities were reported as extending to a variety of settings.

The adult participants were asked to share their ideas on how to improve the program. The participants reported that they would like to expand the hours of service so that working fathers could have more opportunity to be integrated into the family program. Parents expressed their desire for their partners to become more involved in the parenting classes as well as adult basic education. Although this does not explicitly illustrate the ripple effect, it may imply that the participants’ partners are cognizant of the positive effects that the program has on
the entire family and also wanting to share in that. It may also suggest that as the mothers change, they also want their partners to change, so they can be more effective as a parenting team, thus strengthening the family even more. The study does not provide detailed accounts of changes in parent-child relationships, or family relationships, but it does document that these changes were occurring for some of the participants.

Yaffe and Williams (1998) qualitatively examined why women chose to participate in an Even Start Family Literacy program, what their expectations of the program were, and what components of the program led to their satisfaction. Of the six women interviewed, five chose to participate in the program to earn their GED or gain some needed job skills, and one single-parent reported that she was overwhelmed and came to the program for family support. Although the primary goal for most parents was to achieve their GED, the participants disclosed that parenthood was their motivation to obtain their GED. The parents indicated that they not only anticipated achieving their goal of attaining a GED, but also increasing their self-esteem, becoming economically independent, developing job skills, and becoming a good role model for their children. The participants’ expectations and goals reflect the primary goals and intended consequences of the program.

The women also expressed their satisfaction with the program. According to the women, the most engaging factor of the Even Start program was the supportive, warm environment. Moreover, the authors proposed that the “women
helping women” social setting was the quintessential component of this program. The majority of the women specified that the female support system fostered by Even Start was particularly beneficial. The mothers expressed that the ability to share experiences in common with other women gave them the encouragement to move ahead. The women not only connected with each other, but with the staff, and this emotional support was a crucial component to their continued participation. These results echo the change mechanisms described in the literature on self-help groups. The Even Start participants experienced what Yalom (1975) defined as “group cohesiveness,” “universality,” and “instillation of hope.”

The nature of the relationships in Yaffe and Williams’ study were not described in great detail, nor were other relationship changes, such as parent-child relationships. The focus of their study, however, was not to examine changes in these women’s lives as a result of participation. The finding that the “women helping women” model was key in the participants’ motivation to participate is important and deserves further investigation. The authors suggested that future research should examine if the reason for the success was gender, because this has great implications for program implementation. This is true, but it is also important to further examine why these relationships are so important and how they facilitate change within the participants and their family.

As discussed, research literature on family literacy has focused primarily on the intended goals of the program and outcomes related to enhanced literacy for both parents and children. In general, family literacy programs have demonstrated
success in increasing literacy skills, parenting practices, and fostering cognitive and social development in the child participants. The findings just begin to skim the surface of the effectiveness of the program. There are many unexplored areas yet to be documented. The process of change is an area that deserves more attention.

**Chapter Summary**

As family literacy gains more popularity and funding it becomes increasingly important to document the effectiveness of the programs in unique ways. The process of change in participants is a particularly important avenue of research that has yet to be examined. As the literature revealed, quality relationships with others are an important buffer against stress, depression, and, in general, have positive effects on one's overall well-being (Belle, 1982; Makosky, 1982; Lieberman et al, 1979). Moreover, parents with more personal and social resources tend to be less likely to display abusive parenting behavior (Garbarino 1977; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Learning how relationships change in the context of a family literacy program can provide practical benefits, such as implications for program implementation, policy, and insight into family development.

The research reviewed in this chapter provided some evidence that a variety of interventions can produce change in relationships outside of the individual or the target dyad. The current study builds on the existing literature in
several ways. First, the qualitative approach is a relatively unusual way to examine the unintended consequences of an intervention program. Second, this study will systematically examine relationship changes that occur after attending a family literacy program as opposed to a single focus parenting program. Third, this study has the ability to look at data from four program years, examining data collected from 108 participants over a four-year period. This makes for a rich body of data. Finally, the current study will not limit the kinds of relationship changes that may be reported to specific dyads. The analysis will remain open and explore the many changes that can occur, such as changes in peer groups. No other study to date has examined changes in the peer group or extended family.

Even Start is a multifaceted program designed to tackle a complex societal problem. It is an intervention with the overarching goal of breaking the cycle of poverty through literacy education for parents and children. It does not specifically aim to create relationship changes with partners, peers, or relatives, although these relationship changes may be important avenues for buffering against stress and poor mental health. It seems reasonable that the more integrated and holistic an intervention is, the more likely it is to bring about changes in multiple areas of one's life. It is also intuitive that the more complex the intended change of the intervention, the more complex the program needs to be in order to achieve the intended goals. Through a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) it is possible to uncover important unintended consequences that can positively affect participants, such as improved relationships with others. The current study
intends to document the process of change in relationships with others as a result of participating in a family literacy program.
Chapter 3

Methods and Procedures

The questions to be examined in this study are 1) what relationship changes between Even Start parents and target children are identified by parents? 2) How do relationship changes between the target parent-child dyad “ripple out” to other relationships including other children, partners, other family members, and peers? These research questions are best addressed through qualitative analysis. Quantitative methods answer the who, what, when, and where of a research question, whereas qualitative analyses address the how and why of a research question. Berg (1998) described the uses of qualitative data and indicated that qualitative research refers to meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and the rich descriptions of things.

Qualitative analysis has the ability to generate new hypotheses (Glazer & Strauss (1967), thus this study will be exploratory in nature. It will focus on the nature of the lived experiences of participants in a family literacy program, specifically focusing on the unanticipated relationship changes that have previously been observed by the Oregon Even Start Evaluation team. The use of stories from participants will offer a broader view of relationship changes than using a predetermined set of questions, such as a survey.
Oregon's Even Start Evaluation

Since February of 1995, the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Oregon State University, under the direction of Dr. Leslie Richards, has been conducting the statewide evaluation of Oregon's Even Start Family Literacy programs (Richards & Bailey, 1996; Richards, Bailey, Brinkman, & Manoogian-O'Dell, 1996; Richards, 1998; Richards, Corson, Harrington, Merrill, & Pamulapati, 1999; Richards, Pamulapati, Corson, Merrill, 2000). The evaluation utilizes a variety of methods to examine how the various components of Even Start assist families to become closer to self-sufficiency. Both quantitative and qualitative data are collected annually. The strategy of using multiple methods is referred to as triangulation (Berg, 1998) and has been shown to strengthen the validity of the data.

Sample

The current thesis will only use the qualitative data gathered in face-to-face interviews with participants each year (between 1996 and 1999). Individuals were selected for interviews during evaluation team site visits. Selection of the participants was accomplished by asking for volunteers on the day that the evaluation team conducted a site visit. This sample of convenience method was used because of the high absenteeism rate of the participants (Bailey, 1996). The Even Start programs are also spread out across the state and rescheduling
interviews was not feasible. It is plausible that this sample over-represents regular
Even Start participants, those most likely to report program effects.

With this sampling procedure, the current study has a total of 108
participant interviews. Of these, five are men (5%); one is a Caucasian single
father, and the other four are Hispanic men, who speak Spanish as their native
language. They were receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) services
along with their wives and children. The remaining 103 participants are mothers.
Table 3.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants by gender,
ethnicity and native language spoken.

As seen in table 3.1, 55 (51%) speak English as their native language and
are primarily Caucasian; 51 (47%) participants speak another language other than
English as their native language, the majority speaking Spanish. Most Spanish-
speaking mothers (n = 46) are from Mexico, although a few (n = 3) are from South
América. Two participants are Asian (2%). Korean and Vietnamese are their
native languages.

Table 3.2 shows the participants’ marital status by ethnicity. As can be
observed, 57 (53%) participants are married, of those, 42 (74%) are ESL students,
and 14 (26%) are Caucasian. Fifteen (14%) are cohabiting, one is an ESL student.
Thirty-five participants (32%) are single, of those, 8 are ESL students. One
participant’s marital status is unknown.
Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic characteristics of participants (N=108)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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<td>Native Language</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Numbers inside parenthesis are percentage of total participants.

*Two Hispanic participants were raised in the Unites States and were native English-speakers.
Participants also indicated how many children they had, and their ages. In all, there were 237 children in the families represented by this study. The majority of children (n = 167) were infants to age 7 (n = 3.48, SD = 2.04) indicating that they were target child participants of Even Start. Fifty-eight children were identified as non-target children based on the fact that they were eight years or older (n = 10.72, SD = 2.75). We were unable to identify the ages of 12 children. Table 3.3 illustrates the distribution of children by age range.
Table 3.3

Distribution of children by age range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean age</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total children</td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target children</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-target children</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10.72</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ages of 12 children are unknown. Target children are zero to seven years old. Non-target children are eight to 20 years old.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed and piloted on two former Even Start participants in 1995. Changes to the interview questions were made based on these pilot interviews for the protocol used for the 1996 and 1997 interviews. In 1998, a new interview protocol was developed to incorporate specific questions related to relationship changes and other issues that were relevant to the participants but were not specifically queried in the 1996 and 1997 interviews. Therefore, the 1996 and 1997 interviews are slightly different than the 1998 and 1999 interviews. Copies of both interview protocols are attached in Appendix A. Regardless, relationship changes are discussed throughout all four waves of data because the changes spontaneously reported by participants in the first two years
of the evaluation prompted the research team to incorporate more in-depth questions related to relationship changes in the subsequent years.

Procedure

At the time of entry into the program, all participants were informed that their participation in the evaluation process was voluntary and confidential. They were told specifically what confidentiality meant and they were asked to sign an informed consent form. At the time of the interview they were again reminded that their participation was voluntary and responses were confidential. They also were told they could choose not to answer any question, however, participants seldom did so. To ensure greater confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym in the data reported in this thesis.

The principal investigator conducted the majority of the interviews, although graduate student assistants occasionally interviewed participants as well. Some of the ESL participants required an interpreter. Occasionally, the interpreter was inexperienced and reported what the participant said in the third person, rather than the first person. For readability, any quoted materials in this thesis from those interviews have been changed into the first person.

Analysis

All of the interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim. The 1998 and 1999 data were already coded for relationship changes using the WinMax
qualitative software program. The 1996 and 1997 interviews were not previously coded for relationship changes. For the purpose of this study the 1996 and 1997 interviews were entered into WinMax. For consistency and efficiency they were coded using the same coding scheme developed by the evaluation team for the 1998 – 1999 interview data. The team included the principal investigator, three graduate research assistants, and one undergraduate research assistant. The team read the same three interviews and everyone developed their own list of codes. Then, the team met several times to deliberate over what codes to include. Finally, after a long and careful process the codes were decided. The codes were organized by a main code with appropriate subcodes. In order to answer my research questions it made sense to only use the codes under the main code of Relationship changes, and the following subcodes: family as a whole, parent-child, spouse/partner, with others- friends/relatives. The following codes were applied to the first two years of data as previously mentioned. This process entailed reading each interview, hand coding them, and then creating a new project in WinMax. After the project was created, the interviews were entered and coded into Winmax. The software does not analyze the data, rather it facilitates in the organization of the data. For example, once all of the data are entered and coded it is possible to separate all interview segments dealing with parent-child relationships. Therefore, the analysis process is made more manageable.

Codes were applied to material relating to relationship changes wherever it appeared in the text, not just in response to direct questions related to relationship
changes. Three levels of codes were initially used. The first level was relationship changes. The second was the type of relationship (i.e. parent-child, partner, peer). The third level was by the type of change that occurred within the context of the relationship. This level resulted in many subcodes for each type of relationship. For example, when examining the parent-child relationship changes, more effective communication skills and less punitive parenting practices were two prominent themes that emerged. Similarly, when examining peer relationships some subthemes that emerged were the loss of their original peer group due to important changes within themselves, and developing a new peer group through the program, therefore becoming less isolated. After all of the subthemes were clearly developed the most poignant and illustrative quotations were chosen to facilitate the writing process. Chapter four presents the findings.
This chapter will share the experiences of 108 participants of the Even Start Family Literacy program in Oregon. Such a large sample for a qualitative study permitted rich narrative about the multitude of ways that Even Start assists in changing the quality and nature of relationships in the participants’ lives. This study examined 1) relationship changes between Even Start parents and target children and 2) the extent to which relationship changes between the target parent-child “ripple-out” to other relationships including: other children, partners, other family members and peers. The chapter is organized by discussion of each of the different relationship changes that occurred for participants, beginning with the intended change, the parent-target child dyad, and then rippling out to other children in the family, partners, peers, staff, and extended family.

Relationship Changes with Children

This section addresses the first research question: What relationship changes between Even Start parents and target children are identified by parents? The most prolific data were related to the changes between parents and children in general. Every parent, except for one, indicated that Even Start had made a difference in their parenting, resulting in relationship changes with their children.
However, it was unclear whether these relationship changes were specific to the target child. Parents talked about their parenting in general, which suggests that there is little distinguishable difference in relationship changes between the target-child and other children in the household. Therefore, it was not possible to positively conclude whether or not participation in Even Start differentially affected their relationships with other children. When parents had more than one child, they spoke in general about their children, which suggests that their parenting changes also affected their non-participant children.

Some type of formal parent education is part of every Even Start program, and parents are also required to practice their new parenting strategies during Parent and Child Time (PACT), when parents typically join their child in a child-directed literacy activity at least once a week. PACT is designed to help parents understand and learn how to become the first and most influential teachers of their children, one of the key goals of the program. It is thus intuitive that these relationship changes were the most reported, because parent education and support is a mandated part of every Even Start program.

Although each program can determine how they implement and provide parent education, most programs had a weekly parent support group, where parents were able to discuss their parenting challenges, and solutions were discussed. Regardless of how parent education is provided, across all programs and years the same relationship changes were consistently shared. Parent-child relationship changes that emerged included: 1) more effective communication skills; 2) more
More Effective Communication Skills

When asked, "in what ways has Even Start changed your relationship with your child" or "tell us how Even Start’s parent education piece has helped you", the most common response was improved communication. Repeatedly, parents said things like, "they [Even Start] teach you how to talk to your kids", or more simply, "we communicate more." Nearly half of the participants described some manner in which communication has improved with their children. Parents attributed the lack of communication prior to Even Start to a variety of reasons. As a result of this program parents became aware of the benefits of reciprocal communication. They were able not only to communicate more effectively with their children, but also to actively listen to their children. The changes in communication were fundamental and essentially linked to all the other types of changes that occurred within the parent-child dyad. The communication skills taught allowed parents to solve problems with their children more effectively, because they were able to talk rather than yell or otherwise verbally abuse their children. When asked to describe her behavior prior to attending Even Start, Elena, expressed,

"I was so impatient with my child and didn’t know how to communicate with him. When he did something wrong I
would yell at him. It got to the point that he didn’t listen to me because I was always screaming at him.”

Likewise, Isabella, said, “I scream a lot at my kid. Then I started coming here. I learned things that I can do with her like how to talk to her instead of screaming.”

It was not uncommon for participants to describe themselves as behaving negatively, and utilizing damaging communication styles with their children. After entering Even Start, parents learned in the program that yelling keeps them from having the quality of relationship they want with their child, because children do not respond when they are spoken to harshly.

Tanya reported that her relationship with her children has improved greatly since she began Even Start. Instead of yelling, they calmly discuss their problems:

[We] work our problems out without yelling. It’s better to take time out and talk. So now I talk. Shut the radio off and TV and just talk and tell the person what you feel about it, what’s wrong. If he had a bad day from school or somewhere, or something wrong about herself or him, and I sit there and listen to them, and then you work it out…you got to look in their eyes and show them you really care.

Improved communication is a multifaceted skill that is related to many aspects of the program. At the most fundamental level, parents first learned that it is important to talk to their child. Second, they learned that it is more complex than just talking to them. Parents learned that there are more effective and better ways to talk to your children, and a crucial element of communication is active listening, where parents become more in tune with their children’s feelings. For example, Iliana explained, “I’m more patient and how to talk to my kids and stuff and how not, you know, listen to their feelings and all that stuff. I really like it.”
parents are more in tune with their children’s feelings they also can become more aware of their own. Parents articulated that they were yelling less, because they have become a lot more patient with their children. This, in part, is directly related to the fact that parents are learning about basic child development, thus becoming more empathetic towards their children. Moreover, parents learned that words can do a great deal of damage to children. Elizabeth learned that the way you communicate to your child has a huge impact on his/her self-esteem:

She explained to us that a lot of kids have a low self-esteem. And I know I did until I’ve gotten out of it, but it’s just the way you word what you say to your children and that piece that she did I was involved with it cause you say these things and you don’t know that you are shooting them down. You don’t, you have to refer, like if they do something wrong you have to refer to, what you DID was wrong, that YOU’RE not wrong. You know, what you did was bad, but you’re not bad...I think that was one of the most for me, most impact that I remember.

Even Start encourages parents to communicate to their children in a loving, accepting manner, while setting clear behavioral standards. Interviews with parents indicate that they are learning these skills.

Learning More Effective, Less Punitive Discipline Strategies

Parents reported having punitive discipline practices prior to participation in Even Start. They also reported that they learned more positive discipline strategies, another major reason why the parent-child relationships significantly improved. This, too, is directly related and essentially intertwined with improved
communication. As previously discussed, parents described becoming much more patient with their children, and yelling less.

Parents were eager to learn more effective methods of parenting. Some parents disclosed that they were abused as children, or raised with punitive discipline strategies. Therefore, their parenting practices were initially a reflection of what they were exposed to while growing up. Ginger noted,

Because before I scream at them a lot, and I know I’m not supposed to do it, but I was raised that way. My mom did the same with us. And even though you know you not supposed to do it, now with the classes they make you think about it. They talk a lot about those troubles and that makes you think about it. It changes you a lot. You treat them better I think.

Likewise, Angelina, shared,

It’s taught me how to, for one, how to control myself. I’m not yelling and try to talk, cause I came from a family that I was abused as a child, so I was always in foster homes and I was all over town, all over the city. It was hard for me to figure out, well my mother taught me by hitting me, how can I do it differently? So they really have helped me a lot in understanding that because you were raised one way doesn’t necessarily mean you have to raise your kids the same way. You are hurting your kids by doing that...Thank God that, I mean I never did have abused my children, well, not physically, but emotionally. Like I said I would never tell them I love you. If they would say mom, I love you, I would say, what do you guys want? Don’t be telling me you love me.

Paul, a single father of two, also related that he was abused as a child, and was taken away from his biological family. With two sons of his own, and the additional stress of being a single parent, he was desperate to get some very needed parenting skills. He related,

...and I learnt more of how to be a better parent. Instead of, mostly I abuse my kids...I wanted to get away from spanking them. And
this program showed me how to talk to ‘em, and how to handle ‘em, instead of spanking ‘em. So this program showed me a lot.

In the subsequent example, Paul continued to explain how his parenting style has changed since participating in the program,

I want to learn more about talking to ‘em, like I told them, I scream, I spank. I don’t scream no more, I back WAY off of spanking them. When they do something I just bring them in the bedroom, they throw a fit, I let them scream. I better myself that way, a long way around.

Paul was eager to learn more effective parenting strategies in particular, and probably the most important, more effective communication. This once again illustrates that more effective parenting coincides with more positive communication.

Many parents indicated that they were raised to believe that spanking and scolding were appropriate parenting practices. Even Start may not apply a singular method or framework to provide parent education, but one message that parents undoubtedly received was that yelling, hitting, or spanking their child is not an effective or appropriate way to manage their children’s behavior. Amelia, stated,

I was raised in a family that you spanked for discipline. And these days a kid will call the cops on ya if you spank them or whatever, which when she was first crawling and pulling up onto stuff she would get her hand popped for getting into things. Well, I learned when we got here that I shouldn’t spank her.

Even Start’s parenting philosophy is non-violent, and encourages parents to not use corporal punishment as a means to child behavioral management. This is an important message given that this is a very high-risk population. Because child
protective service workers often mandated families to attend Even Start, and given
that so many parents were abused themselves as children, it is important to insist
on no spanking. More importantly, Even Start provides parents with the tools to
practice this philosophy. Like Kirsten, who gained more confidence in her
parenting choices:

It already helped me change a lot of ways with my son as far as
raising him. My views on discipline, on having, he’s my son so I
have the right to choose what I want to do as far as, I’m not
spanking him and when he goes to my mother’s my mother’s not
going to spank him either, or he’s not going to go to my mother’s.
And I have that choice because he’s my son.

Consequently, one of the unintended consequences for the participants of
this program is both the prevention and intervention of child abuse. Although, the
program is not specifically designed to function as a child abuse
prevention/intervention it certainly has that positive unintended consequence.

Most parents shared that learning new discipline and parenting practices
were the most important aspect of the parenting classes. Beyond greater
communication, and less spanking, parents related other parenting skills that they
learned. Miranda, for instance, learned that offering choices to her child is an
effective behavior management strategy.

Because of the education that Even Start gave me I didn’t know that
you have to give, if you give him a choice, he’s not going to scream
and yell at ya. If you respect them, they’re going to behave better. I
didn’t know that. I didn’t know that at all.
Yasmina learned the important skill of redirection, "I was a real scolder! And they told me I shouldn’t scold. One should – or actually even better to distract them.”

Many participants reported learning the importance of providing structure for their children as a tool for behavioral management. Some children respond well and really need a structured environment. When children have clear guidelines and they know what to expect they may have fewer tantrums and poor behavior.

Often Even Start parents did not have any guidelines or schedules prior to Even Start. Linda learned the importance of schedules and a structured environment:

They’ve taught me to keep a schedule every day, so the baby won’t get confused. And try and give them bedtime at a certain time and everything. And I keep my house a lot cleaner than I used to. I realized my daughter, she’s crawling everywhere, almost walking. So I have to keep things out of her reach and I got new plugs for my walls...those safety ones...and yeah they’ve helped me a lot.

Marianna shared similar changes,

We are more on a routine for one. Schedules, structured. Get up in the morning and you eat breakfast and then get ready and go to school, and then come here and after we get home you can have a little snack, watch TV, go to the park, and then dinner time, and then clean up time. And then go to bed. Story time comes in with bed time.

Miranda communicated that she gained the trust of her children through providing more structure and her children are also reaching developmental milestones,

I think it’s, we’re a lot more trusting of each other. I think that they know that mom’s always going to be there now. They are scheduled, they have a routine. Where before they just ran around
all day. They’re both potty trained and off the bottle, they weren’t when I started.

Gayle modeled the program’s schedule in her home and found that her children enjoy it, she communicated,

they’ve helped me have the same kind of schedule at home, cause I do everything about the same at home. Lunch at the same time, naps at the same time. And they like it. It keeps their world comfortable I think.

Even Start parents learned a lot of different strategies that help lessen the stresses associated with raising children. Even Start staff help parents learn how to modify their behavior and life style by providing them with strategies that can realistically be implemented.

Knowledge of Basic Child Development

Parents learned basic knowledge about child development as part of their Even Start participation. This newfound knowledge led them to a greater understanding of their children, which in turn, led them to better communication and parenting in general. Close to half of the parents reported that they didn’t know anything about their child’s capabilities, or what their child was like in general before attending the program. Often they shared that becoming a parent was the first time they had contact with children and did not have any idea what being a parent entailed. It is almost as if the child is like a computer and they were learning a new programming language without the instructions or a manual. Even Start is key in decoding this mysterious language. Judy discussed openly that her child was stubborn, and before Even Start she was continuously getting into power
struggles. But now, she says, “we both can understand each other more now. It’s kind of hard just understanding how a three-year-old thinks.” Understanding how their child thinks, feels, what he/she is capable of, and most importantly, learning that their child’s behavior is perfectly normal leads to better communication and more active listening as well. For parents learning that their children’s behaviors are directly related to their feelings, enables parents to take the time to listen and talk to their children in a way that they can easily understand, which, in turn, lends itself to more positive interactions. Carmela, related,

Before starting the program I imagined that it [parenting] was different. I never realized that it was so important to talk to them… I didn’t think about that. I’ve seen families that wake up, eat, and say ‘sit down because I’m going to do housework.’ When they cried, eat again. I didn’t realize how important it was.

This was a common experience with many parents. Alison quite succinctly stated,

When they’re little you think, they’re little and they don’t understand, and they taught me that they do understand, they’re little you just have to talk to them more.

Again, it is clear that having a greater understanding of child development in general leads to greater communication and ultimately brings them closer to their children. Rosalinda, clearly illustrates this point,

Well, in the beginning I feel like, well I love my baby. I really love her. But I don’t know what to do with her. And since I know more about her now I can love her. I feel like, more closer.

Gaining basic knowledge about child development allows Even Start parents to be more confident as well. This confidence brings them much closer to their children, because they now know how to do more things with their children, or at least
where they can find the answers and turn for help. One mother shares how Even Start built her confidence, which, in turn, leads to better parenting,

P: I have very low self esteem, but getting this, my education along with the parenting, the two combined, just makes me climb that much higher and feel better.

I: Would you say that your participation has led to any changes in the way you do things as a parent?

P: I don’t let my kids get away with as much as I used to. They don’t walk over me as much.

Sheila’s low self-esteem was preventing her from being an effective parent. Now with the support of the Even Start staff, she has confidence in herself to be more assertive with her children so her own children do not take advantage of her. Many other parents shared similar experiences, like Wanda, who simply said, “now I have a higher self esteem at being a parent,” and Bridget, who remarked, “they’ve been helping me with my confidence and stuff like that...‘I’m the parent, they are the children,’ type of thing.”

Some parents enter with strong parenting skills and considerable experience with young children. Some parents came to Even Start strictly to obtain their GED, or to learn English. They perceived themselves to have good parenting skills prior to participation in the program, nevertheless, they still reported learning new parenting skills and in general feeling more confident and positive about their parenting and their relationship with their children. Like Salma, who said, “our relationship before was fine, but now it’s better,” or Marjory, who said, “I was a good parent. The same as now...nothing’s really changed.”
Enriching Activities

When asked how their relationship has changed with their children, many parents reported that the most important way their relationship has changed is in the quality and amount of time they spend with their children now. Parents reported a considerable increase in the amount of time spent engaging in literacy activities with their children. This finding suggests that Even Start is successful in accomplishing the intended goal of assisting parents in becoming the first and most influential teacher to their children. The following quotes are an illustration of some general ways that parents perceived their relationships with their children improving due to learning some new activities:

"In a way, I like to go to Even Start because they’re teaching me a lot of activities that I can do with [my kids] that I hadn’t even thought about doing with the kids. It’s really helping me to be involved more with my children."

"Before I came to Portland I didn’t realize what I have to do with my children to keep their attention. For example, the kids, my kids are very active. I didn’t know what I can do, with that energy. But now, I can do different activities with them like cut magazines and paste different things. I try at home things that they do here."

Even Start is particularly effective in promoting more enriching activities in the home, because they offer suggestions that are realistic for limited resource families. Several parents commented on how Even Start facilitated their ability to engage in fun activities that were low cost:

"We do a lot of different reading, and we make up like different board games, or like there’s one where Pamela has done before where you take a cereal box and cut it out and put it together as a puzzle. You know you’d never think of doing anything like that."
Just different things that we try to make up ourselves. Instead of you know buying a game or, which you can't afford a lot of them, but you know, imagination wise.

They teach us different activities, it doesn’t have to be a really expensive toy. It could be a toilet paper roll, rubber bands, glitter, it doesn’t have to be all that expensive stuff.

They’ve had quite a few different things that you can make that don’t cost very much. The recipe for play dough -- that was in my hair for about two weeks -- but they had fun. They really provide you with a lot of low cost ways to create things at home to make crafts.

Some parents articulated that before Even Start they were not aware of the benefits of reading to their children. Perhaps, when they were younger, their parents did not read to them, so they did not have a positive role model to follow. Or, perhaps they did not realize that a parent does not need to be a perfect reader to enjoy a book with a child. One of the primary goals, and philosophy of the program, is as parent’s literacy increases, they will be more effective in supporting their children’s development. The following vignettes are illustrative of this pattern:

The change in me is so different. I never read to them before and now every night I read to them at least ten minutes. Now that I’ve started work, I ask my husband to read to them.

I’ve been doing more educational things with them than I used to. Teach them numbers, letters, reading, writing, stuff like that. I’m reading, and then I let them read back to me.

I never would [read to her]. I’d always; it would be one of the bigger kids. I’d say play with the kids, read to them, cause I didn’t know how to read. And then they just push it on you to sit and read or spend quality time with your kids and it makes a lot of difference, it really does, ‘cause she’s so smart. She is the smartest
kids that I’ve had. The change in me is so different. I never read to them before and now every night I read to them at least ten minutes.

I never read to him before. I never showed him books. I thought he doesn’t understand me how am I going to show him? Now since we’ve learned about the development of the child now I know about these things and I read to him.

Parents also learned that their children are capable of engaging in self-help activities, and helping out around the home. When asked if her relationship with her daughter has changed, Guadalupe replied, “for the better. We get along better and you know, before I was afraid to let her make peanut butter sandwiches cause I didn’t want the mess. And now I let her do that and she cleans up her mess.”

Likewise, another mother remarked, “Before I wouldn’t let them help me cook or do the laundry or anything, but now, just little things I see make a difference.”

Lucia also shared, “before I came all the time I done everything, everything. The children didn’t have anything. Now you help me clean the home, and help in the garden, and one day is for one child.”

Relationship Changes with Significant Others

Even Start is designed to empower parents so that ultimately they can become self-sufficient. The holistic nature of the program does this through promoting improved literacy skills, mental health, social support, and life skills. The program is also designed to improve family functioning, primarily through offering parenting skills. The primary focus of the program is on the target parent and child. The program is not explicitly designed to increase marital stability or
happiness and it does not offer marital counseling, either. Through empowering these parents in these multiple ways, however, while offering such intensive services (at least 12 hours per week, sometimes for several years), some participants revealed that their relationship with their significant other improved as a result of participating in this program. Two-thirds of the sample was married or cohabiting. Stephanie, who is currently cohabitating with her partner, shared,

Yeah. Cause at the support group we usually talk a lot about relationships and Monique [parent educator], she’s really good, um. She, you know, if we’re having problems with our boyfriends, we can bring it here and that feels good because we know there’s someone else we can talk about it with, but we get along a LOT better. He’s really happy for me and her and he’s happy, he sees the change, it may be a little, but people see it...I just stay here no matter what, they let you come to school, like I said, fighting with your boyfriend or whatever, they’ll want you to come here. And they said you can sit on the couch and cry, ‘cause at least you made it here. They just want you to be here. So, they are just real, it’s real comfortable.

Amanda also shared, “I tell them about certain problems that my husband and I have and they’ve told me suggestions that I should try and everything. We talk about really personal stuff here and...they just explain stuff to me.”

It is evident that parenting support extends beyond the parent-child dyad to include significant others, as well. Stephanie’s narrative demonstrates that Even Start is successful in meeting the needs of their participants through taking a holistic approach to serving the participants. Even Start staff are aware that the participants face multiple barriers and challenges in their lives, and in order to be successful in school or work, the home environment must be functioning well. This fits well into the systems theory approach to therapy and the theoretical
perspective of this study (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Even Start helps participants within all subsystems in order to help them reach success.

Even Start participants not only learn more effective communication patterns with their child, but also with their partners. Josefina shared, "now we have better communication," she attributed that to learning new techniques to communicate with her husband through the program. Rosalinda, shared similar insights,

I had some changes, a lot of changes. Because I have more communication with my husband, because before I get mad very easily with him, with the kids. And now I take more control of myself and I have good communication with him and I get that kind of thing from parenting classes.

The skills learned in parenting class transcend parent-child interactions. In a sense it serves as a catalyst for important changes in other interpersonal relationships. Yasmine also dramatically changed her behavior, which created a much more harmonious relationship between she and her partner:

During this time...when I am here in Even Start, I change my behavior. Before I came I all the time fighting with my husband, because all the time yelling, yelling at the children, yelling at him, and yelling at everybody. But now the relationship has changed. Because I'm under control and he's fine with that. He's very happy. And all the time he encourage her to go to school, to learn things. But when I was upset or anything, he preferred to go to another place to get some drinks.

Sharon's relationship has also improved, "Because, now I can listen instead of yell. Instead of I don't care what you say, this is what I have to say, I don't care. So yeah, we get along a lot, a lot better."
More active listening, empathy, and better communication skills leading to significant improvements in relationships with partners resonates throughout the interviews. It is evident that, for many parents, relationships become less conflicted, as they learned new skills. Marta, shared,

M: I talk to him more, I'm more sensitive, or I'm trying to be more sensitive about his feelings. We just open up more. Because I used to feel like I couldn't talk to him. It wasn't that I was hiding things, but I just felt like I couldn't talk to him. I didn't feel comfortable. And even though I've been with this man for seven years, I just never felt comfortable. He's always intimidated to me to where I felt if I talked to him about something that bothered me, or something I wanted to do and he didn't like it, it would just start a big argument and start a big fight. A big fiasco! But now I open up more, I tell him how I'm feeling, I tell him what's going on and it's a lot better.

I: How has he responded to that?

M: He likes it. He thinks it great.

I: Do you feel like he has sort of responded by being more open and talking more with you about how he's feeling too?

M: Yeah!

As previously discussed, Even Start fosters improved mental health. Specifically, participants report higher self-esteem and confidence. Feeling better about oneself directly contributed to improved interpersonal relationships. Cindy succinctly articulated this concept, "I don't know about him. I don't know, all I can say is that it's helped me! It's made me a stronger person, made me more independent. And I know that he appreciates that in a woman. He appreciates a strong woman, he isn't into needy, weak, helpless people. So he probably appreciates me more." Improved self-esteem and greater independence were often
synonymous. As participants gained more life skills, their self-esteem increased, and as their self-esteem increased, their relationships with their partners improved.

These changes were most dramatic and frequently reported amongst the Hispanic population. First, Hispanic participants were more likely to be partnered, (75%) as opposed to the English speaking participants (39%). Second, the Hispanic participants had the additional challenges of simultaneously learning a new language and assimilating into a new culture. Third, they were new to this country and had a very limited social support systems, where frequently their husband represented their entire social support network, naturally creating a lot of stress on the relationships. Finally, the patriarchal structure of the Latin culture, where men and women generally engage in more traditional gender roles, in concurrence with gender inequalities in educational attainment and the labor market, contributed to greater or more consequential changes within the marital dyad.

The following quotes exemplify some of the changes reported by Hispanic mothers:

Before, I don't think that he believed that I could do things. And now that I know, he even asks me to do things for him like call here, call over there, do different things.

I feel more confident with the things that I do. Because all the time I was home and I was reading books. But I don't have anybody to help me with my questions, because my husband was working all the time, and when he came back at home, all the time I need something to do and I ask him a lot of things...he was tired. And now I don't do that. I have questions, but not as much as before. And I don't have a lot of stress with him.
Before I think when we got married, I always depended on him. If I wanted to go to the clinic he would have to take me or if I wanted to buy a dress he would have to pay for it because I didn’t know English. I think it has changed a lot. Now I go to the market by myself. I buy what I want. I drive wherever I want to go. I can pay bills. My husband feels better because I don’t have to depend on him.

I, for example, would go to the store and I wouldn’t understand what people were saying and my husband would say, ‘Aye, Ana, I’m going to send you to school one day.’ And I would kind of hunch up and scootch down because I felt so... Now, I go to the store and I say, ‘Is this what they said?’ And I understand them a little bit and now he shows to me, ‘Hummm, you’re learning.’ So lots has changed.

Some participants did not indicate a direct change in the relationship itself, but indicated that their partners were supportive and interested in what they were learning. A few participants indicated that they felt their relationship was already strong, consequently, there was little room for improvement, such as Juanita and her husband, “We don’t have a lot of time to spend together. But when we have time, I talk a lot and usually he asks me, what did you see in the parenting classes today.” Another mother shared, “He’s really supportive of the whole thing. When we have family night, which we do once a month, he’s come to that and he really enjoys that and the idea that my son’s right here with me.”

**Change in Partner’s Parenting**

A few participants indicated that their partners, who did not directly participate in the program, actually changed their behaviors as well. Marisol communicated,
They taught us what the values of having family and how to confront problems and how to do different stuff and like I say, with my husband he’s a very macho man, Mexican. He’s like ‘why should I do this?’ He’s involved even now he goes to the parenting class like on Thursdays with me, not all the time, but he’s putting a lot of interest in that and he’s trying to better himself by trying to learn English.

Probably one of the most impressive changes is when the father’s parenting changes. The following narrative is representative of this notable change:

I: Would you say that participation in ES has led to other changes at home, for instance, has it changed anything in your relationship with your spouse?

R: Yeah, it’s been more mellow and more kind of like, easier said than, ‘okay this is the way it’s going’...I’ve noticed that listening to Dave (her husband) it’s more, ‘this is what you need to be doing’, rather than ‘do this NOW’. I’ve heard him say those things and before he was, ‘that’s silly, that won’t work, you’ve just got to tell him what to do’. So now he’s more open to ‘this is what you need to be doing, this is where you need to be’, not ‘get over in the corner now’!

I: So, it sounds like it’s changed big Dave’s parenting a little bit.

R: Yeah. Therefore he’s not as angry...[he] just say[s] ‘O.K. fine’, and then goes on to deal with other things. Instead of ‘OK I’m angry and I’m so mad I just don’t know what to do’, I guess it’s easier cause he’s calmer and able to deal with whatever needs to be done.

Although Mariaelena’s husband did not directly change his parenting, he has become more involved with the family since she began going to Even Start.

M: We didn’t do things together, but now, like sometimes he works on Saturdays also. He comes home showers, changes, we go out to eat somewhere as a family. He doesn’t just come in and lay on the bed.

I: Do you feel that he participates more?
Domestic Violence

In some families, women experienced domestic violence both prior to, and after entering the program. Even Start sometimes gives women the skills and confidence to make some important decisions about what they should do. Some women choose to leave their abusive partners, while others may decide to stay. Regardless of the decision, Even Start teaches mothers strategies to communicate with potentially abusive partners, and that they have their full support whatever their choice may be. Tasha, a mother of two toddlers, is on the waiting list for some domestic violence shelters so she can get away from her abusive partner. She poignantly disclosed,

I: It sounds like [Even Start] has led you to make some very, very major decisions.

T: Hard and scary ones. I’ve had enough support here and knowledge to know that I’m not going to waste my time trying to figure out why things are the way they are. I’m just, the bottom line is that I don’t like it, I’m not comfortable, I’m not happy, and I don’t have to do it. I don’t care if he gets mad, if he freaks out, if he goes to jail, if he tries to kill himself, this man is 31-years-old and I know damn well that he knows what he’s doing! He watched his dad do it to his mom. He’s told me. I’ve seen it. I have to stress on that cause I want to be able to pass my [GED] test.

Catherine also related how Even Start helped her in the process of leaving her abusive partner,

So everything’s falling into place and I really don’t see how I could have done this myself! I wouldn’t have gotten a lawyer, I wouldn’t
have gotten housing. They helped me get a restraining order, because that was something I wanted to do but I didn’t know how.

Esperanza reported that she was oppressed by her husband, and was relieved to get assistance from Even Start:

I started in this program because I was having problems with my husband. He is a White man. He didn’t give me the opportunity for much. I wanted to have friends and activities. This program has afforded me that opportunity. I am very happy to be here in this program. I wanted to learn English and at the same time be close to my children. I wanted to be away from the confinement of my home. I wanted to do things. And coming here has helped me with all my needs. I am also learning how to be a better parent. This is perfect for me. My children and I are learning together. For me it also means independence.

She continued, “I have learned to listen to (my husband). I try not to get excited. Sometimes he yells and I try to be patient and to listen to him.”

Some women feel that they have no other choice but to stay, and Even Start may help them to lessen the abusive cycles, and in Esperanza’s case, begin building the skills and support to make the best of her situation. As discovered with parent-child relationships, Even Start operates as an intervention and prevention of child abuse. Certainly it can act as an intervention to all forms of domestic violence.

It is important to reiterate, however, that these participants over-represent committed Even Start participants. Therefore, the parents interviewed are people that were able to continue participation despite challenges in the home. It is plausible that many women living in controlling, oppressive, and/or abusive environments quickly left the program. Even Start staff have reported these experiences.
Changes in Relationships with Peers and Family

Even Start is not designed specifically to foster changes with peers or extended family, however, participants also report changes in these important relationships. The program was designed to recognize the multigenerational and multidimensional aspects of low resource families. If the overarching goals of the program (economic self-sufficiency, parents as first teachers to their children) are eventually to be achieved, all key areas and issues pertaining to the lives of these participants must be realized. Peers and family are an important aspect of almost everyone’s lives. If these relationships are not harmonious, detrimental, or non-existent it can have devastating effects on both the parents and the children.

Relationship Changes with Peers

It was evident from the analysis of the participant interviews that before attending Even Start they had significant difficulties in relationships with peers for a variety of reasons. The data revealed that the majority of parents were isolated; they reported that they did not have friends prior to attending Even Start. One mother shared that Even Start helped her to come out of her shell a little, “I was scared. I didn’t go around people. I was too insecure about not knowing how, people were going to make fun, so I just stayed away from everyone. And she [a parent educator] had to open me up, ‘you’re never going to learn if you don’t go in there and help yourself.’”
Even Start parents often have low self-esteem when they enter the program. Each program year, roughly 35% of participants enter the program with low self-esteem; of those, 80% show improved self-esteem (Richards et al, 2000). Low self-esteem can greatly affect one's ability to form friendships. Some parents also have poor social skills that are essential for forming and maintaining close friendships and moreover, employability. Jenna is a good example of someone who learned how to form friendships in Even Start. When asked if Even Start has changed her relationships with other people in her life she replied,

Yes. Cause when I started here I didn’t trust anybody and I didn’t like anybody. I mean I was nice, I wasn’t rude to anybody, but I didn’t like anybody and I actually developed friendships here and I learned how to talk to people more efficiently so they hear what I am saying and not just the anger I’m feeling. Gigi [parent educator], she helped me a lot with that.

Sometimes participants have a difficult time trusting others, perhaps because of a traumatic childhood, or having been hurt by friends in the past. It is not an uncommon theme. Bella had trouble keeping her friendships because of her anger. She said, “I used to get really mad at my friends and then they would go away. Now I have more confidence, and patience.” Regardless of what the issue was, the confidence Even Start instilled in the participants helped them make changes in their behavior that resulted in more effective interpersonal skills.

Several parents who had a peer group at the onset of the program came to the realization that they needed to make more selective choices in regard to friendships. Like Mariah, who comically related:
Before I would make friends with anybody. I would make friends with you know, the dog walking around, ‘hi’ you know. And now I set standards for myself. You know I’ll talk to anybody, but I’m not going to make friends with just anybody. I have standards. If I don’t have anything in common with this person, why am I talking to them? They have no education and I’m trying. And they don’t want anything better than they have, and I’ve told my friends, you should try going to Even Start. You should try going back... ‘well I can’t because of this’, making up excuses. Why am I talking to you then? I want to talk to people who have goals in life.

As the parents became more focused on goals for themselves and their families they began to drift apart from their friends, which is natural. People seek out others who share similar interests, values, and aspirations. Bella felt a little remorseful about this change, when she replied, “Unfortunately yes,” when asked about any friendship changes, “I would never judge anybody or anything, but my friends—a lot of them don’t have goals. And unfortunately I don’t associate with them anymore.” Renee became more selective of who she allows around her children now:

I’m a little more open-eyed in which friends I should keep, which friends I should have. If a friend comes over with a beer, would I want my kids to see that friend having a beer and being that an enjoyment? I don’t want, I don’t think that’s OK. I think that coming over here, ‘you drove in that car so that means you being my friend, that’s OK to drive in the car drunk.’ And I don’t want, I have to be more choosy and open-eyed about my friends.

Not only did the participants become more discriminatory in their choice of friends, they also learned how to set better boundaries for themselves. Julia exemplifies this:

I learned how to tell people, I mean it was like I was always giving to my friends and doing for my friends. They [Even Start] helped me say, ‘I’d rather be with me and my kids. I need to worry about
them and I need to worry about me. And I’m sorry that you guys are my friends and that you guys are hurting, but this is my family and this is, we’re all we got and we have to take care of each other.’

Wanda echoed:

Yeah, cause before I couldn’t [say no], I’d say ‘well you can sleep on my floor,’ but now it’s like, ‘no.’ I don’t want my daughter to get up in the morning and see someone laying on the couch and be like, ‘who’s that Mom?’ Well, what do you do? ‘Cause she’ll tell people straight up, she’ll be like, ‘you can’t sleep on my couch. I want to sit down to watch cartoons.’ And they want to sleep ‘til noon, and I’m like ‘no, you need to get up!’ ‘Cause we get up in my house at the crack of dawn, our day starts early and we go to bed early. That’s our schedule. And some people have a hard time dealing with that. And I’m like, ‘well you know where the door is. Sorry.’

Some parents who come to Even Start have had problems with drugs or alcohol.

Typically, they have to change their peer group to get sober. In Pam’s case, her friends followed her example after she discontinued contact:

The last two years I have totally changed!!! I was very irresponsible, I didn’t have any goals, I had dreams, but no goals. I could just drink the rest of my life away and it wouldn’t bother me a bit! And then having to raise 3 children, it really changed my mind. It didn’t bother me to be a drunk, but it bothered me to be a drunk mother. So I just quit, and it was very hard. And then 3 months later my fiancée quit. And then my friend quit. It was amazing, everybody just decided to quit. I shut off all of my friends, I told them this was for me...and then those people I shocked are now trying to quit.

It was rare for participants to speak so candidly about any prior drug or alcohol abuse, presumably because of social desirability. Conversations with staff members revealed that a good number of parents have struggled with drugs and alcohol and the process of distancing themselves from their friends is a very
difficult and painful process. Even Start can be a crucial factor in helping them stay sober, because they meet a new, sober peer group that shares the same goals.

Sarah, a teen mother, indicated that by becoming a mother she lost her group of friends, and now Even Start is her only opportunity to socialize, “[I] don’t talk to very many people very much, other than like Even Start. I talk to the parents in Even Start... I was a teenager before I got pregnant, well I still am, but you know I was social. I talked to everybody, and now I don’t do that very much.” For teen parents, like Sarah, it can be especially difficult to lose their former friends and social circle, when peers play such an important role in their lives. Even Start can help teen mothers cope with this major life change.

As previously mentioned, the majority of participants indicated that they were isolated, a common problem for mothers of small children who stay at home. This isolation can be very detrimental to mental health and well-being, which in turn can have a negative effect on their ability to nurture their children. Even Start presents an opportunity for these women to socialize with other parents that they would not have had otherwise. It is the ideal situation, because they are in a group of women who are very similar to each other, like Kristin who said, “we’re all pretty close. There’s a common bond. Just because we’re all young and moms, and most of us are alone.” Rosalinda also offered a good example of this, “I like to be with more Moms, because I know that I’m not the only person that needs help. Cause I know that everybody’s making sacrifices to come here and I know that. I’m not the only person, sometimes you feel, ‘oh, I’m the only person this happen
to me.' It’s good for me.” Wanda discussed the reciprocity of sharing that takes place in the program:

One of the other girls is trying for community college in September. And I went, ‘I found my ride Bonnie [parent educator]!’ And that girl goes, ‘what?’ I says, ‘I’m starting community college in September, can I have a ride please? I’ll help pay for gas.’ She goes, ‘you would?’ O.K.! So, I hope I’ve got my ride. We’ve talked about it, and I’m hoping it will work out and we’ll become friends and things. This is cool. ‘Cause you sit there and think, we don’t have nothing in common. Then you find out you have all kinds of things in common. There are a couple of girls that go here and one of them’s young, a lot younger than I am, and she’s going through parenting problems. I says, ‘I deal with that every day of my life too.” She says, ‘how do you deal with it?’ I tell her it’s hard!! And you just want to go up and scream at their face just like they used to do to you when you was little and, but you want to be an adult, you want to act like an adult, so you just walk away. And she goes, ‘I’m going to do that!!’

Wanda’s story illustrates some of the many ways in which the parents are supportive of each other. Giving to others can oftentimes be more rewarding than receiving, but Wanda eagerly shared her excitement with making new friends and getting help from a classmate. Moreover, sharing her parenting experiences and offering solutions was what she was particularly proud of, because it feels good to help others in need, it can boost one’s self-esteem and give them self-respect.

Repeatedly parents report that they are no longer isolated as a result of participation in this program. When asked if she had any friends to rely on, Alice perfectly described this transformation:

Yeah, before I didn’t until this program and you’ll probably hear that from a lot of the girls here. Not even just at school. Now we’re extending out to like, if one of us is going to do something, we’ll invite a few of the other girls to bring to bring their kids to do stuff together. So I think that’s really neat. And if somebody needs
something, like there was somebody here that had just moved down and they didn’t have any furniture. And we got, we had a bulletin board up and she put down what she needed and everybody that could find it or if they had it at their house, gave it to her. So that’s one of the ways we all try to help each other.

Paul, the only father in his Even Start program, explained that it was challenging being the only male in a group of women in the beginning, but once he gained more confidence, he became more comfortable with them and he began to enjoy their company:

Yeah, yeah. Cause I am, I get lonely. And I get to ‘em good when they talk to me. I feel good. Majority of them would sit and talk to each other and I would sit and listen. But when they bring me into it, I enjoy talking to them. I got to learn how to talk to them.

Some parents also reported that they were active in recruiting their friends to participate with them in the program. Sara was successful at getting her friend to participate and it strengthened their friendship. She commented,

I have one friend that goes here that I told to come here before, asked if she would want to because I thought it was cool, she came like the day after me...So it kind of made that relationship a little better I guess...we see each other more often, we’re more – better friends.

A number of parents did not report any changes in friendships. These women tended to be isolated by choice. It is plausible that they have not been in the program as long as others and thus have not had the opportunity to form a strong bond with the others. In Pat’s case, although she considers her classmates her friends, she prefers spending time alone:
P: I don’t have any friends. Not really. I mean, friends to me are a headache. The more friends you’ve got the more headaches you’ve got basically.

I: You’re kind of a loner?

P: ...all the girls at school at school you know, are my friends. But you know, I try, I don’t like to hang around them. I mean, I like to stay home, be with my horse and my garden, and my kids. I don’t like, I’m not a bar, I don’t drink, so I don’t like bars or anything like that. So I’m basically a loner.

Even in cases where these mothers choose not to socialize outside of the program the process of sharing in a group setting helps parents to make a lot of important changes in their lives. Even Start staff facilitates and foster these relationships by allowing parents to openly have discussions about their parenting concerns, as well as any other issues that are of importance. The atmosphere of sharing their personal stories, listening to others, and giving advice all contribute to personal growth. This connection with others can really help these women deal with some painful issues, similar to Katrina:

Since I’ve started coming here [they] have helped me be more trusting and open with people. It’s helped me to overcome a lot of the issues that I had around my problem with being a survivor of domestic violence. And being able to talk with people that have had the same experience, may be going through the same experience, knowing that me and my story may help them and their story is helping me to be stronger to say something to them.

Parents find solace in the realization that they are not alone. Moreover, it is enormously empowering when they can offer someone else reassurance. The reciprocal nature of the support group appeared to be the essential component for participants to make changes in their relationships with others.
Hispanic Participants

The Hispanic participants also reported that they were isolated, because they were new to this country. Often they did not have an established group of friends, nor did they have family here. Even Start is particularly important for the Hispanic participants in regards to fostering social relationships. Central to the identity of Hispanics is the need to be connected to others (Marín, 1994). Hispanics are characterized as allocentric, or the opposite of individualistic. According to Marín, Hispanics are more likely to experience significant levels of personal interdependence, suggesting that they are more likely to trust and be willing to make sacrifices for the welfare of peers. They place great value on maintaining harmonious relationships with others. Mércedes poignantly exemplifies this:

I was becoming unsociable. I was closing into my own world. All that I do I mirror and all that I do my children will also do and so I decided to become more social. I am the type that likes to make people laugh – not offend them. I respect others. I joke around. Everyone has an important place in my life. I was deteriorating.

One Hispanic participant in particular shared how her passion in life is to help others:

I have a lot of friends and one day I help put three marriages together again…when they have problems [they] call me or they talk about it. And so I know we need this support and I already told Victoria [parent educator] and she say I have to write a letter so we can put many Hispanic people together. The problem is when I have to call to the places and I need for my culture or my people, they don’t have enough people that speak Spanish to talk all their problems. I call many places and I find one lady who speak
Spanish. Many people very poor, they don’t have enough. So that’s why I planning to do groups.

This participant’s Even Start program was in their last year of funding. She was devastated, because this program helped her in the process of acculturation. She recognized the great need of this service for other Hispanics in her community. She was determined to create a support group, like Even Start, where Hispanic women can make important connections with others and learn about services. Her strong desire to help others is illustrative of her cultural values, and the concept of allocentrism, as she is empathetic towards others’ needs, and is willing to give of herself to support the in-group.

Nearly all of the Hispanic participants (90%) expressed that they were isolated before attending Even Start. Given their cultural values, finding friends through Even Start was especially important. Carmen related, “I don’t feel so lonely. I have persons to share, I have the opportunity to know more people, and I make friends, more and more friends.” In the same way, Carmela said,

the program has helped me because now I have friends here and I have a good relationship here with other people, and now I realize that it is important to have good relation with the others. Because before I was alone and I lived by myself, nobody else just me.

Unlike, the non-Hispanic participants, the Hispanic participants did not explicitly relate that making friends led to interpersonal change; rather, it appeared that making the social connection in and of itself was enough. Perhaps the language barrier also made it difficult to communicate any major changes.
However, given their cultural values, the isolation that they experience here in the US can be especially damaging.

Familialism is another fundamental value of Hispanics (Marín, 1994). Most participants indicated that they did not have extended family here. Because Hispanics demonstrate a level of familialism that is different than other cultures, where individuals maintain a strong identification and attachment to the nuclear family as well as other relatives, their isolation is particularly daunting. This, once again, illustrates the importance of Even Start in the Hispanic participants’ lives. The emphasis that Even Start places on family, and children is in accordance with their values, and can help strengthen the bond within their nuclear family as was revealed in the changes they experienced with their spouses and children documented in previous sections of the chapter.

Relationship Changes with Extended Family

The majority of participants reported that they had not seen any changes in their relationship with their family of origin as a result of Even Start participation. As formerly discussed, 90% of the participants reported that they were isolated not only from peers, but also their family. Some reported their family members lived very far away, such as Alice who said, “all my family lives 2,000 miles away.” Others indicated that did not have contact with their family because they were estranged, akin to Nancy who responded, “I don’t call my family members at all. I don’t call none of my family when I need help.” As formerly discussed, many
parents were raised in abusive environments and for their own mental health and well-being they have chosen not to have contact with their family. Nevertheless, there were a few participants who did feel that Even Start was responsible for some changes in their relationships with their family of origin. Probably the most dramatic example is Denise’s story, who disclosed,

they [her family] look at me as a different person. If I want to do something for myself, I'm going to be somebody, they look at me more positive I guess than before. Big big change. Before I was nothing but a failure I guess.

Five other participants also indicated that they had the approval from their family. Pam also said, “my mother’s very proud of me,” likewise, Casey remarked, “well my mom and grandma, they’re happy that I go to school.” When asked, “do you think Even Start had an impact on the rest of your family,” Elizabeth proudly resounded,

My mom. My mom’s really happy. She really loves this. From what I’ve told her about this place, she thinks it’s wonderful! And she knows how much it’s done for me and she says, she doesn’t think I would have gotten my GED without it and she’s probably right.”

Receiving positive reinforcement from their parents is another facilitator towards improved self-esteem and motivation to continue with the program. Rebecca shared that the confidence she gained from Even Start gave her the ability to earn the respect of her family and be more assertive with them:

More confidence. I walk with my head more, I’m real proud of myself I’m proud o say, ‘yeah, I’m going to ES.’ They ask me, well are you working? ‘No, but I’m working for my GED.’ Instead of saying, ‘no I’m not working. I don’t know what I’m doing.’ I have specific, I’m working for my GED and it makes me feel good. So a lot of confidence!! A lot of good self-esteem. With me having a
A confident attitude: I don't run away from problems. You know, if something goes wrong I have to take it one step at a time and deal with it one step at a time. I can do it! And I have some family members that like to be protective, I'm the baby of the family so you don't hurt the baby. And it's like, I can stand up for myself and I've told them you know, they're worried about the divorce thing going on in my life, it's O.K. I can take care of myself. I can do this! I'm getting my GED. I can do this. And they see a different change in me and they're proud of me. I get a lot of support family wise, they are backing me 100%.

Angela, a teen mom who still lives with her parents, explained how Even Start has improved her relationship with them:

It’s helped me to talk to my family on communication better. And letting them understand a young teens situation compared to what they were back then. It’s helped us see the difference and helped my mom in parenting, get involved here. Coming to the family nights. They are really happy for me. It’s helped us communicate a lot better.

This change exemplifies Even Start’s multigenerational approach to serving families. Angela’s story is one that resonates throughout the data, where learning more effective communication skills can lead to remarkable changes in their relationships with others.

Many described Even Start as, “one big happy family.” The intensity of the program and the parent support-group model led to this cohesiveness. Even Start in a sense “reparents” the parents, so that they can parent better themselves and live happier and more productive lives.

Wanda was having a lot of problems with her mentally ill mother and Even Start taught her how to let go:
They [Even Start] help out with anything, family problems, children problems, stuff like that. 'Cause I sitting there talking to her about my Mom problems and she goes, 'leave your Mom alone. If she’s going to treat you like that leave her alone.' I’m having a hard time doing it, but I’m doing it. I’m doing it now.

Wanda related that both her mother and father have hurt her repeatedly. The Even Start staff taught her that she does not need to interact with her family if all they do is make her feel badly. Participation in the program helped parents learn to stand up for themselves. This occurs through increased feelings of self-worth and the supportive staff reassuring them that this is the right thing to do. Without this guidance, the participants may never get in touch with their painful childhood experiences.

Chapter Summary

It is clear that this analysis substantiates that multiple relationship changes, both intended as well as unintended, occurred for many of the Even Start participants. The intended change between parents and their children were the most apparent given that all but one participant shared that Even Start enhanced their relationship with their child in some way or another. Then, as the ripple effect model suggests, the next closest relationship in proximity had the most reported relationship changes. Within this sample, the next most reported change was with their intimate partners, then peers, and finally extended family. In sum, if this were a sample of young single parents living at home with their family of origin, the next most likely changes after parent-child probably would have been with their family of origin.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

Relationship changes as a result of participating in Oregon's Even Start family literacy programs were examined using a qualitative approach and a systems theory perspective. The purpose of this study was to explore both the intended target parent-child relationship and the unintended relationship changes involving partners, peers, and relatives. Through interviewing participants using a semi-structured interview, 108 program participants were able to share relationship changes that were important to them.

This chapter will begin by summarizing the results of the analysis. Theoretical implications will be reviewed. Limitations and implications for research and practice will be identified. Then the link between the findings and the literature will be discussed.

Summary of Findings

Parent-Child Relationship Changes

The first relationship change that was analyzed was the parent-child dyad. This was an intended consequence of the program, and provided the most prolific data. The most common response by parents was that they learned more effective
communication techniques to use with their children. The parents shared that this new skill brought them closer to their children. This finding suggests that the parenting education component of the program is effective in bringing about important changes that improve the quality of parent-child relationships.

Parents also frequently reported that they are now spanking less and using less punitive parenting practices. Even Start has a no spanking parenting philosophy and the parents indicated that they put this philosophy into practice at home as well as at school. Parents also reported learning alternatives to spanking that they found to be more effective, such as redirection, time outs, and offering choices. Parents articulated that these new parenting skills reduced the amount of conflict and power struggles in which they engaged with their child, suggesting more harmonious relationships in general. This finding implied that the program functions as a prevention and/or intervention for child abuse and neglect; surely a positive unintended outcome.

Another important finding was that parents learned basic knowledge of child development. This newfound knowledge led to greater confidence in their parenting, which, in turn, led to improved parent-child interactions. Some participants communicated they had feelings of ambivalence or even fear of motherhood prior to entering Even Start. Learning that their children’s behaviors were normal was comforting to parents and it helped them to relax and have more realistic expectations of their children.
Parents indicated learning literacy based activities as well. Many parents shared that they were excited to learn new activities to do with their children at home that were inexpensive. Given that these are low-resource families, inexpensive, yet stimulating activities were highly valued by the participants. Furthermore, these responses were illustrative of intended program outcomes, suggesting that parents were learning new ways to actively become teachers to their children.

Participants reported acquiring more confidence in their own reading, which translated into increasing the amount of reading they do with their children. Most parents communicated that they learned the importance of reading to their children regularly, and indicated that they now read to their children every night before bedtime. As Even Start’s primary focus is on family literacy, these testimonials provide evidence of program effectiveness as well as a change in the quality of parent-child relationships.

The participants’ descriptions of changes in their parenting were broad and generalized to all of their children. It was apparent that their parenting changes affected all children in the family, not just the target-child(ren). Parents who had non-participant children did not specify a child benefiting from their new parenting skills, rather they referred to their children in the plural, such as, “they” or “my children” when describing how their relationships had changed.
Changes in Relationships with Intimate Partners

Over two-thirds of the sample were partnered. Of those, some shared insights into important relationship changes with their intimate partners that they attributed to participation in Even Start. The communication skills they learned in the parent education component of the program had a “ripple effect.” Some participants indicated that they learned better communication skills, and were more patient. As participants gained more confidence and self-respect, some indicated that they also earned greater respect from their partners.

The Hispanic participants, who were most likely to be partnered (n = 42), reported the most frequent relationship changes within the intimate partner dyad. This was most likely due to their previous isolation and the process of acculturation. As the women became less isolated and began speaking English, they gained the confidence to negotiate with the outside world. This process led to more harmonious and less conflictive relationships, because they became less dependent on their partners.

Probably the most dramatic example of “the ripple effect” was that a few mothers reported non-participant fathers changed their parenting as a result of the wife’s participation in Even Start. It’s plausible that the mothers modeled their new parenting strategies and discussed the importance of them working together as a team, thus encouraging the fathers to adopt the same parenting practices. When both parents are supportive of each other’s parenting decisions, it not only benefits the child(ren), but also the parents’ relationship as well. Some fathers simply
became more involved with their families, perhaps because the value that Even Start places on the importance of spending quality family time together was communicated to the fathers via the mother, and they saw the value as well.

Issues involving domestic violence or oppression by some women's partners were also disclosed in the interviews. A few women poignantly related how Even Start helped them through the painful and difficult process of leaving their abusive partners. Not all women chose to leave, however, those who stayed shared some strategies they learned to reduce conflict. Again, Even Start appears to serve as a viable intervention in instances of domestic violence.

Relationship Changes with Peers

Participants also reported a number of important peer relationship changes as an additional benefit of the program. Most of the women reported being isolated before they began Even Start. The supportive environment of the program fostered the development of peer relationships. This was particularly important for the Hispanic participants, whose cultural worldview places great value on relationships with others.

Other parents, who did not report being isolated, completely changed their peer group as a result of participation in the program. As their own goals became more focused they began to make some really important interpersonal changes. As a result, they drifted apart from their former group of friends. They discovered they had more in common with other Even Start parents. Furthermore, parents
gained more self-respect and confidence, which led them to make better choices in friends. Other reasons offered for changing their peer groups were due to making different lifestyle choices, such as, focusing more on parenting, becoming clean and sober, and realizing that prior friendships were non-reciprocal.

Relationship Changes with Extended Family

Relationship changes with extended families provided the fewest changes. This was largely due to the fact that most participants indicated that they had poor relations with their families of origin, or they lived too far away to have much contact. A few participants with amiable family relationships, revealed that they have gained more respect from their family of origin as a result of their participation in Even Start. Alternatively, those with poor family relationships found solace in the parenting support group and gained more insight into the nature of their relationships with their own parents. Even Start’s supportive environment served as “fictive kin,” the cohesiveness of the group created a “family like” environment.

Theoretical Implications

A General Systems theory theoretical framework was applied in this study. A “ripple effect” model was developed specifically for this thesis as well. The findings provide support for both models. General systems theory views the family as a system, where each individual’s behavior affects each and every other
member within the family system. The theory also posits that systems, such as peer
groups, are also affected by an individual member’s behavior. Programs and
policies that affect family life represent a suprasystem that has influence on
subsystems, for example, peer groups and families. This study examined a
program that had a great influence on the behavior of its participants as indicated
by the participants’ testimonials. The program, in turn, had an impact on the close
relationships of the participants. The findings suggest that the closer the
relationship, such as, the immediate family unit, are more greatly influenced by the
program then peers or family members. This in part is due to the intended
outcomes of the program to influence parent-child relationships as well as
proximity. Many participants mentioned they were not close to their family of
origin due to living far away. The findings also suggest that Even Start performs as
a subsystem, much like a family, where staff and other participants mutually
influence each other.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this study provided important implications regarding
relationship changes as a result of participation in Oregon’s Even Start Family
Literacy programs. Regardless, the study has certain limitations, but they can
contribute direction for future research. The limitations in this study are not new to
research in the social sciences, particularly program evaluation studies.
The first limitation pertains to the age-old question of whether the participants’ perceptions are a reliable indicator of what changes actually occurred. Are their reflections unbiased and helpful? Theorists with positivistic views would argue that the uses of the participants’ perceptions were not legitimate sources of information (Doherty, Boss, La Rossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993; Lieberman et al, 1979). We cannot say whether these participants’ narratives of their relationship changes provide direct evidence of the effectiveness of Even Start, however the qualitative accounts of the changes within the parent-child relationship do coincide with other Even Start evaluations that utilized different methods (Richards et al, 1999; Richardson, 1993). Moreover, the kinds of changes they reported have also been encountered in other fields of study. Regardless, this is an answerable question, and should be further investigated. In the future, research should utilize a triangulation of methods approach (Berg, 1998), where both quantitative and qualitative approaches are blended. The use of some quantitative measures relating to parenting confidence, knowledge about child development, marital satisfaction and adjustment, and peer groups using a pre-post design, or a retrospective pre-post approach (Pratt, McGuigan, and Katzev, 2001) would be valuable. It would also be beneficial to interview the Even Start staff who regularly interact with the families and have the opportunity to observe the changes they have made over time. Interviewing intimate partners about their perceptions of changes could be useful as well. Another suggestion is to include a comparison group using a single focus program.
Other limitations regarding the research procedures were detected as well. The interviews were not all conducted by the same investigator. Personal interviewing styles can affect the quality of the data obtained. Some researchers may have better interpersonal skills, or probe more, thus procuring more prolific data. The majority of Spanish speaking participants required a translator. On occasion the translator was inexperienced and explained what the participant said in the third person. We were unable to check the accuracy of the translations. Furthermore, the culturally appropriateness of the interview protocol is uncertain. Finally, two similar, yet different protocols were used (see Appendix A). This, however, did not affect the results in a significant manner.

A longitudinal study is also recommended to determine whether the relationship changes reported by participants are long lasting. A follow-up study with the same participants would be particularly beneficial. Following participants after they have left the program for one to five years would offer some insight into whether the program has a long-term affect.

**Link Between Literature and Research Findings**

The literature reviewed for this study came from a variety of different areas of inquiry, since the literature on family literacy is new and limited. Looking to other types of programs and their effects can help to articulate and understand the processes of change in relationships that occurred for the participants in the present study. The literature reviewed discussed research on self-help groups as a
way to gain insight into the mechanisms of change in a group setting. Literature on the intended as well as unintended outcomes of parenting programs was also discussed. There were also a few studies that examined how parent education affected relationships between intimate partners. In addition, studies on the effectiveness and satisfaction with family literacy programs were reviewed.

This study suggests that there is “a ripple affect” where participation in Even Start not only changes the relationship of the target parent-child dyad, but creates other unintended relationship changes as well. Both the self-help group literature and parent education literature had similar findings, although, spousal relationships were the only other relationships explored in detail.

The parent-child relationship changes revealed in this study reflect changes reported in other studies, particularly, First and Way’s (1995) qualitative evaluation of eight women’s experiences in a single focus parenting program. They, too, indicated more effective communication skills, more quality time spent with their children, less abusive parenting practices, and more confidence in their parenting. Because their program focused solely on parenting, they did not find increases in literacy-based activities or cognitively stimulating activities.

The literature on Even Start also shared some similarities. In general, evaluations found an improvement in parenting. One program in particular provided some evidence of program effects rippling out to other non-participant children in the family. They also reported similar parenting changes, such as,
better discipline practices and improved communication. Outside of the target parent-child dyad, other relationship changes were not discussed.

First and Way (1995) also found evidence that outcomes extend beyond the intended consequences of the parenting program. They reported that parents expanded their social network through participation in the program. The women in their study were also initially isolated when they entered the program and indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to socialize with others in the class. The present study, Yaffe and William's (1998) Even Start evaluation, and the literature regarding self-help groups all report this same finding. The literature on self-help groups focused on the mechanisms and process of this change. Yalom (1975) defined this process of change as “universality” and “group cohesion,” where the key factor is the ability to normalize their experiences. This process is achieved by sharing their inner parenting anxieties in a supportive environment with others like them. This study, as well as the others, not only indicated a cathartic benefit, but also an altruistic benefit, where they gained self-confidence by offering support and advice to others (First & Way, 1995; Lieberman, et al, 1979; Yaffe & Williams, 1998).

Peer group changes were not explicitly evaluated in any of the literature. First & Way (1995), however, did note participants transforming their lives in a number of important ways, similar to our findings. Some mothers in the First and Way study reported making major life decisions, such as quitting drinking for the sake of their children as a result of program participation. In our study, this change
translated into discontinuing contact with their former group of friends. It is plausible that this change occurred in other programs, but was not specifically examined.

The changes in relationships with intimate partners were unique to this study. The qualitative approach enabled a more detailed analysis into the process of this change, rather than simply examining changes in marital satisfaction or adjustment as prior studies have done (Noller & Taylor, 1989; Winans & Cooker, 1984). The testimonials of marital relationship changes in an evaluation of a women’s consciousness raising group (Lieberman et al, 1979) were more illustrative of cognitive changes, rather than behavioral changes or an increase in satisfaction, as indicated in this study.

Implications for Practice

As formerly discussed, poverty can strain family relationships (Belle, 1982; Garbarino 1977; Huston & McLoyd 1994; Makosky 1982; Mc Loyd 1990; St. Pierre et. al, 1995; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). This study provides several important implications for practitioners working with families in poverty.

The participants of this study attributed the multiple relationship changes to the supportive environment of Even Start. The supportive guidance given by the parent educators was often cited as the primary reason for changes in the participants’ relationships with others. The other primary mechanism of change as indicated by participants, was the model of Even Start’s parenting education piece.
The staff's leadership, in combination with the group setting seemed to be particularly effective. This suggests that the key elements for promoting relationship changes are supportive, yet knowledgeable staff using the support-group framework, where the participants have the opportunity to openly discuss any issues of concern. It is important that programs remain open to the needs of the participants and not solely focus on specific program outcomes.

Parents can face a variety of stressors in their lives outside of parenting, particularly if they are low income. Allowing parents to explore the primary source of their problems, which may not relate to the parent-child relationship, may be the most beneficial way to bring about the intended change. When external stressors are negatively affecting a parent's ability to provide a nurturing environment, any given program will not be particularly effective until they can make some realistic goals to reduce the source of stress. A holistic family literacy program can do just that. Mezirow (1990) a prominent theorist in adult education, also contends that personal transformations must happen first before any social transformations can succeed.

This study provides some evidence that Even Start can serve as an effective prevention and intervention of domestic violence. This finding also provides important implications for practitioners and policy makers. Practitioners can focus their efforts on sending the message that there are more effective ways to parent than yelling and using corporal punishment. Given the testimonials of the participants, teaching basic knowledge of child development, communication
skills, and providing examples of behavior management techniques, are all essential components to a successful prevention/intervention program.

With the emphasis on family preservation, the Even Start program can provide a valuable social service beyond the intended goals of increasing literacy, job skills, and improved parenting. The program, or a similar model, may be effective in keeping families intact, saving the government millions of dollars a year by keeping children out of the foster care system. Moreover, the benefits to children, families, and the larger society could be tremendous. Certainly, further investigation into the actual effectiveness and benefits of this proposed intervention would be necessary.

This study provided insight into the needs of families from different social and cultural backgrounds, in particular the Hispanic population. The process of acculturation is difficult and Even Start can ease this process. Even Start is a relatively small program, though, and the Hispanic population is rapidly increasing. An increase in family literacy programs is recommended, as well as further research on how to best serve this population.

The present study contributes important insight into some of the intended and unintended ways that a family literacy program can benefit the participants and their families. Furthermore, it offers implications for practitioners, programs, and policy makers. Perhaps most importantly it provides evidence that Even Start provides an invaluable service to individuals, families, and society.
References


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Appendices
PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
EVEN START, 1996

We are part of a team that is evaluating the Oregon Even Start Programs and we would like to ask you some questions about your experiences with the program. Your information will help us find out what the good parts of the program are and what needs to be improved or changed (give confidentiality statement). We appreciate you taking time to talk with us about the program.

1) First could you tell us a little bit about your family? How many children do you have and what are their ages? Do you have any children not living at home with you?

2) Besides your children, does anyone else live in your household? If yes, who are they and what is their relationship to you?

3) Do you remember when you started coming to the Even Start program? (Probe: How old was your child?)

4) Which other family members participate in the Even Start program?

5) What made you decide to participate in the Even Start program?

6) What is your goal for participating in Even Start?

7) There are four parts to the Even Start program (adult education, early childhood education, parent education, and PACT). How does your Even Start program provide these activities to you and your child? (Use visual model of the program components)
Parenting:

One of the services most Even Start programs provide is help with parenting. We all know that parenting is a difficult job.

1) What would you say are the hardest things about parenting for you?
2) What would you say are your strengths as a parent?
3) Parenting education is a topic that covers three areas.
   a) It helps parents find services available to help their families such as how to find a doctor or where to find good used children’s clothing.
   b) It helps parents learn new ways of doing things with their children, and
   c) It offers ideas on how to cope with the challenges of parenting.

Has your Even Start program helped you in any of these areas? (Use cards, one with each area listed on it and ask individually. Use the following probes).

For example:

Has your Even Start program helped you find services for your family?
If yes, what are some of the services?
If not, are their services you need that you are not receiving?

Have you learned new ways of doing things with your children or playing with your children?
If yes, what are some of the ways?

Have you learned ideas of coping with the challenges of parenting that might help make parenting easier for you?
4) Is there any parenting information you would like to get that you are not getting at this time?

5) Do you have any family members you can call on when you need help with something? What are some ways your family has helped you?

6) Do you have any friends you can call on when you need help with something? What are some ways your friends have helped out?

**Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Child Care:**

Next I would like to ask you some questions about the preschool and child care services of the Even Start program.

1) Does your child attend some kind of child care or preschool through Even Start?

   If yes, ask the following:

   a) What does your child enjoy most about the preschool?

   b) What do you like most about the preschool?

   c) Is there anything you or your children don’t like about the preschool situation?

   d) Is there anything you would like to change about the preschool program?

   e) What opportunities, if any, do you have to do things with your child in the early childhood classroom? How does this work for you? How does this work for your child?
If the child is in wrap around care ask the questions again for the child care situation.

2) Does Even Start assist you with other child care needs so that you can participate in the program? How does that work for you? How does that work for your child?

Adult Basic Education (ABE)/English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes:

One of the major parts of Even Start is ABE/ESL.

1) What adult education activities are you participating in?

2) What is your goal in adult education? To obtain a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), finish an ESL course, go to college or other school?

3) What part of the adult education class do you enjoy the most? Why?

4) Is there any part of the ABE/ESL classes you would like to see changed or that has been especially hard for you?

Support Services:

Even Start programs sometimes provide other services for you and your family. For example they might provide transportation or help finding housing.

1) Other than parent education, adult education, and child care, does your Even Start program provide other services to you and your family? If yes, what are they and how satisfied are you with the services? (probe about transportation if not mentioned)

2) Are there other things you wish your Even Start program could help with? If yes, what are they?
Summary Questions:

Even Start tries to meet the individual needs of the families it serves, so each family’s experience with the program is different. As I said before, there are four parts to the Even Start program, (adult education, early childhood education, parenting education, and PACT). In what ways, if any, do you see the different parts of the program working together?

PROBE: For example, when you do an activity with your child, do you talk about it later in class?

1) a) What, if any, are the most important ways that Even Start has helped you as an individual?
   b) What, if any, are the most important ways that Even Start has helped your child/ren?
   c) What, if any, are the most important ways that Even Start has helped the rest of your family?

2) Do you think your participation in Even Start will help you and your family after you complete the program? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

3) Do you think anything needs to be changed to make Even Start a better or stronger program? If yes, what?

4) What things would you like to see remain the same?

5) Is there anything we missed or anything else you would like to say about the program?
I am part of a team that is evaluating the Even Start Programs in Oregon and I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences in the program. Your information will help us find out what parts of the program seem to work well, and what parts need to be improved or changed. We are also interested in understanding more about the families who choose to participate in Even Start. Doing this interview is voluntary, and if you do not want to answer any or all questions you do not have to. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect the services you and your family receive from Even Start. The information you give to me in the interview will be kept private and confidential. Your name will not be used on any reports, and your responses will be combined with others to provide summaries of the program. Do you have any questions before we start?

1. First, tell me a little bit about your family. How many children do you have, and what are their ages? Which ones are participating in Even Start? Are there other family members that participate in Even Start, on a regular basis, or for special events?

2. When did you first start coming to Even Start? (probe: How old was your child?)

3. Have there been any changes in your family since you started Even Start?
   - Have you moved? (If yes, ask why)
   - Are there any new family members?
   - Are there any changes in who lives in the house?
   - Has anyone changed jobs, or started a new job?
   - Has anyone lost a job, or reduced the number of hours working?
   - Have there been any other important family changes that you can think of?

4. I'd like to know how you came to be in a program like Even Start. How did you first hear about it? What made you decide to start participating?

5. When you first came to Even Start, what were your goals? Do you have the same goals now, or have they changed?
6. Did you have any formal schooling when you were a child? What were your school experiences like? How did school work for you? Can you tell me a story about a school experience you remember really well? (If the interviewee has trouble with this try asking for a story about something really good that happened to them in school, and a story about something not so good that happened to them in school.)

7. What about now? Has your participation in Even Start led to any changes in the way you do things as a parent?
   - Has it changed the types of activities you do with your children?
   - Has it changed anything in your relationship with your children?
   - Has it changed the way you think about the future for your children?

8. Has your participation in Even Start led to any other changes in the way you do things at home?
   - Has it changed anything in your relationship with your spouse or partner?
   - What about changes with others in your life—friends, or other family members?
   - Has it changed the way you think about the future? How?

9. How has Even Start worked for your child? In what sort of educational program does your child participate? How does he/she like it?

10. What opportunities have you had to do things with your child in his/her classroom? How has that worked for you, and how has that worked for your child?

11. Even Start is a demanding program and asks parents and children to spend a lot of time at school each week. Sometimes that is really hard for families. What parts of Even Start have encouraged you to keep participating?

12. Finally, I have some summary questions about your experiences with Even Start.
   - What, if any, are the most important ways that Even Start has helped you as an individual?
   - What, if any, are the most important ways that Even Start has helped your child(ren)?
   - What, if any, are the most important ways that Even Start has helped the rest of your family?
13. Is there anything that you think needs to be changed to make Even Start a better or stronger program?

14. Is there anything that we missed, or that you would like to say about the program?