A qualitative study of parents’ experiences using family support services:

applying the concept of surface and depth

United Kingdom policy and practice endorses family support for child

well-being. Achieving such support requires multi-agency approaches

that consider all aspects of parents’ and children’s lives and which offer

practical, social and emotional help. The potential for services to make a

positive impact on parents and their families will depend in part on the

level and nature of engagement. In this paper, a case is made for the

application of the two-part surface and depth concept for understanding

how practitioners engage with families and how they might improve the

chances of supporting sustainable differences for parents and families. To

illustrate, qualitative data from a review of family centre support

provided by a north of England local authority are presented. The review

was commissioned to explore why families often need to re-engage with

intensive support services. Data were drawn from interviews with

parents (n = 18, recruited following a survey of all those registered with

the service during April–May 2009) and discussions with family centre

support workers (n = 4), and following thematic analysis, three dominant

themes emerged – resources available, staff approach and real life –

which were appraised in the light of the surface and depth concept.

Much of the work with parents effectively dealt with pressing needs. This

felt gratifying for both parent and worker and supported immediate

service engagement. However, each noted that the more complex issues

in parents’ lives went unchallenged and thus the sustainability of

progress in terms of parenting practice was questionable. A strengths

focused approach by staff that understood needs in the context of

parents’ real-life circumstances was important to parent engagement.

Thus, longer term benefits from family support require practitioners to

work with parents to problem solve immediate issues while also digging

deeper to acknowledge and seek to resolve the more complex challenges

parents face in their real lives.

Keywords: family centres, family support, parenting education,

practitioner–parent relationship

Childhood Adversity and Children’s Academic Functioning: Roles

of Parenting Stress and Neighborhood Support

Abstract Existing research has shown that adverse childhood

experiences from family instability and lack of safety

increase children’s risk for poor academic functioning. A

recent conceptual framework, however, has emphasized the

need to investigate how parenting might mediate while

community context might moderate the association between

childhood adversity and children’s cognitive development.

In the current study, we tested the roles of parenting stress

and neighborhood support in the association between

cumulative childhood adversity and children’s current academic

functioning. We conducted a secondary data analysis

on the subsample of school-aged children (i.e., 6–17 years

old; N = 65,680) from the 2011–2012 United States

National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH). The parent

provided telephone survey data on six types of adversity

(e.g., parent’s divorce) that the target child experienced,

parenting stress, neighborhood support, as well as the

child’s academic functioning. Controlling for the child’s

age, gender, ethnicity, and the parent’s education level,

structural equation modeling (SEM) revealed a significant

moderated mediating effect: parenting stress partially

mediated the association between history of childhood

adversity and children’s current academic functioning (β =

−1.760, p < 0.001), while neighborhood support moderated

the association between parenting stress (β = 0.492, p <

* 1. and academic functioning.

Keywords Childhood adversity ● Parenting stress ●

Neighborhood support ● Academic functioning ● Moderated

mediating effect ● Structural equation modeling