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Parenting Education for Low-Income Job Seekers: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of the Parenting with Love and Logic Program

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Parenting Education for Low-Income Job Seekers: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of the *Parenting with Love and Logic* Program

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Although the principles and strategies outlined in Cline and Fay's (1990) Parenting with Love and Logic have been the foundation for several parent and educator training curricula over the last 30 years, there has been a dearth of empirical research to evaluate these programs (Fay, 2012). Prior research has documented the impact of cumulative family risk factors on parenting skills and child outcomes (Repetti et al., 2002, 2012), but few studies have examined the impact of parenting education courses within unemployed, low-income families. This study investigates perceived parental efficacy across the four program domains of connection, autonomy, regulation, and parental stress management within a sample (n = 267) of unemployed parents from several counties across a western state. Analyses show consistent retrospective-pre to post improvement across all four domains. Additionally, reported gains did not vary significantly by gender, age, ethnicity, education level, prior divorce, or financial strain. Small group differences were found according to income level, the age of the participants' oldest child, and dosage (amount of prior relationship education exposure as well as the number of class sessions attended). Qualitative results are included to illustrate further the thoughts and experiences of program participants.

Keywords: parenting, relationship education, connection, autonomy, regulation, parental stress, low-income, unemployed

Literature Review

The connection between parenting behaviors and child well-being is well established (e.g., Barber et al., 2005; Baumrind, 2013, Darling, 1999). In fact, the strength of the relationship between parenting and child well-being led to a paradigm shift to parental education as a key method of improving child behavior (Kaminski et al., 2008). Parent training programs have been widely accepted as an efficacious means for promoting both parent and child well-being. Meta-analyses examining the efficacy of these programs have found they generally help reduce child

disruptive behaviors (e.g., Furlong et al., 2012; Litschge et al., 2010; Lundahl et al., 2006) and have relatively large effect sizes on positive parent-child interactions, emotional communication skills, and parenting consistency (Kaminski et al., 2008). The overall approach is to alter parents' behavior by increasing parenting knowledge and skills in order to assist them in fostering the desired changes in their child(ren)'s behavior (Lundahl et al., 2006).

The *Parenting with Love and Logic* program (hereafter *Love and Logic*) was developed by Fay and Cline in 1977 and focuses on improving parent-child relationships through setting appropriate limits, encouraging responsibility through choices and consequences, and empathetic support (Cline & Fay, 2006). *Love and Logic* has been very popular with twenty-six printings, translation into eight languages, and is sold worldwide (Cline & Fay, 2006). However, despite its popularity, there has been a dearth of empirical research evaluating the curriculum. In his 2012 review of the research on the *Love and Logic* curriculum, Fay cited several unpublished studies on the effects the program has had on participants, but as of this writing, no published empirical evaluations of *Love and Logic* could be found in the literature. The present study seeks to evaluate the programmatic impact of the *Love and Logic* curriculum. Given the risks associated with parenting in low-income contexts (e.g., harsh parenting, adverse child outcomes; Repetti et al., 2002) and the additional stress of unemployment on parents (Frasquilho et al., 2016), this mixed-methods study examined possible impacts among a low-income, unemployed population of parents currently participating in a Department of Workforce Services program using quantitative, short-answer qualitative, and qualitative focus group data.

Parenting Dimensions

Researchers traditionally take one of two approaches to studying parenting characteristics: the examination of distinct parenting *dimensions* or aggregating parenting dimensions into *typologies* (Barber, 1997; Barber et al., 2005; Darling, 1993). The dimensional approach examines discrete parenting skills or characteristics predictive of child or parent outcomes. For example, Bernier et al. (2010) examined the singular dimension of parenting external regulation for its effects on child outcomes. The typological approach groups characteristics together to create categorical parenting styles. This approach has been common since the 1960s and is most readily visible in Baumrind's parenting styles (2013). Though both approaches are common, the dimensional approach has been used regularly in family process research and allows for a more nuanced inspection of parenting characteristics (Barber et al., 2005). We chose to utilize the dimensional approach to examine the impact of the *Love and Logic* program on three parenting dimensions: connection, autonomy, and regulation.

Three Dimensions of Parenting

The parenting dimensions of connection, autonomy, and regulation have extensive theoretical and empirical histories. Since the mid-1900s, various forms of parental support and control have been a primary focus of parenting literature, in part because these themes continue to be

empirically supported both longitudinally and cross-culturally (Barber et al., 2005). Barber and Xia (2013) postulated that the essence of both dimensional and typological parenting research can be encompassed in three components: nurturance, adequate regulation of behavior, and the absence of intrusive or demeaning behaviors. Encapsulated within these dimensions are connection (nurturance), autonomy (absence of intrusive behaviors, particularly psychological control), and regulation (adequate regulation of behavior). Based on this empirical foundation, we use the dimensions of connection, autonomy, and regulation to examine the relevance of the *Love and Logic* program.

Connection

Connection refers to the emotional availability of a caregiver; it reflects the climate of the parent-child relationship (Barber et al., 2005). Related terms include warmth, closeness, responsiveness, dyadic synchrony, and mutuality (Clark & Ladd, 2000). Connection provides a sense of belonging and is manifest in interactions that are supportive, consistent, affectionate, and positive (Barber et al., 2005). This type of parental support has been found to be strongly correlated to psychosocial competence in children (Barber et al., 2005), while the absence of connection is associated with poor health and internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children (Pinquart, 2016, 2017; Repetti et al., 2002).

Parent-child connectedness sets a precedence of positive affectivity that influences children's relationships with others, reducing externalizing behaviors (Clark & Ladd, 2000). According to attachment theory, the parent-child connection creates the "secure base" the child needs to explore the world in healthy ways (Ainsworth, 1990; Bowlby, 1982). Clark and Ladd (2000) found children with high parent-child connections experienced higher levels of peer acceptance and had more mutual and harmonious friendships with peers. Research supports a focus on the parent-child connection as a point of intervention. A meta-analysis of 128 parenting programs found two of the four most robust predictors of effect sizes related to better parenting skills and lower levels of externalizing problems in children were related to enhancing the overall quality of the parent-child relationship (Kaminski et al., 2008). Connection between parent and child can be fostered through parental empathy toward their children (Stern et al., 2015). The *Love and Logic program* emphasizes building the parent-child connection through teaching empathic skills to parents (Cline & Fay, 2006).

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to parental support and encouragement of a child's freedom and agency and has been shown to enable children in their goals, choices, and sense of volition (Bernier et al., 2010). By focusing on fostering autonomy in their children, parents demonstrate respect for the child's individuality and provide opportunities for them to make their own decisions (Barber et al., 2005). Autonomy is conceptually related to personal agency, individuation, differentiation, respect for individuality, and self-competence (Barber et al., 2005; Bernier et al., 2010; Gurdal et

al., 2015). When autonomy is negated through high coercion, manipulation, and constraint by parents, internalizing and externalizing problems in children may occur (Repetti et al., 2002; Pinquart, 2016, 2017), such as depression and antisocial behavior (Barber et al., 2005). In research, autonomy support can be coded as parental scaffolding, respect for the child's individual pacing when completing a task, and validation of the child's opinions and perspectives (Bernier et al., 2010; Clark & Ladd, 2000). In the *Love and Logic* program, parents are taught to help support autonomy by facilitating opportunities for children to solve their own problems (Cline & Fay, 2006).

Regulation

Regulation refers to parents setting appropriate limits on their child's behavior and can include concepts such as structure, discipline, control, demandingness, authority, and parental monitoring (Barber & Xia, 2013). Regulation is seen as a dual-sided dimension, as both excess and deficiency lead to detrimental child outcomes, leading to a nonlinear relationship between parental regulation and child outcomes (Barber & Xia, 2013). Parental regulation types that are psychologically controlling are correlated with low self-efficacy and internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Barber & Xia, 2013; Pinquart, 2016, 2017), while the absence of parental regulation is linked to a greater likelihood of adolescent promiscuity and risk-taking (Repetti et al., 2002). Regulation is emphasized in the *Love and Logic* curricula as parents are encouraged to set limits and gain control of their children's behaviors (Cline & Fay, 2006).

While the parenting dimensions of autonomy and regulation are antonymous, they are also complimentary, as the balance between freedom and constraint is essential in child development. Baumrind (1968) described the duality within authoritative parents as valuing "both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity" (p. 261), and research supports the connection between healthy parent-child relationships and a healthy balance between providing affection and limits (Richaud et al., 2013). Children develop individuality through autonomy, while regulation promotes the development of socially acceptable behaviors (Barber & Xia, 2013; Darling, 1993). The *Love and Logic* course teaches parents how to find a balance between autonomy-granting and regulating behaviors. Specifically, parents are encouraged to allow children to make choices within appropriate limits.

Parenting in Low-Income Contexts

The present study evaluates the programmatic gains and lived experiences of parents who were unemployed at the time of their participation in the program to assess what impact, if any, participation in the *Love and Logic* course had on their parenting during that period of extreme poverty.

Research into socioeconomic status (SES) suggests income may be associated with parenting quality. Clark and Ladd (2000) found a positive correlation between SES and the parenting dimensions of connectedness and autonomy support, suggesting that a lack of economic stress may facilitate these dimensions. Conversely, children in low SES families are more likely to be exposed to punitive parenting, mistreatment, abuse, or violence (Repetti et al., 2002). In terms of child outcomes, low income is associated with higher rates of inadequate nutrition, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and educational struggles (Prince & Howard, 2002). Beyond the obvious need for resources, families with fewer resources and more stressors may thus have a relatively higher need for parenting education to help prevent negative child outcomes. In addressing the challenges of implementing parenting or relationship education courses with low-income populations, Shirer et al. (2004) noted that the convenience of providing courses in locations, which also offer employment or training services, may increase participation and buy-in among program populations. The current study focuses on such a course, a parenting education class for those unemployed and taught in partnership with the Department of Workforce Services, alongside courses in resume building, job searching, and employment interviewing.

While parenting education is most common among middle-class ethnic majorities (Heinrichs et al., 2005), there is an equal, if not greater, need for interventions for at-risk families (Repetti et al., 2002). However, most of the research on parenting interventions within low-income populations focuses on the spillover effect, where improvements in the parent's marriage or relationship quality "spillover" in the form of improvements to parenting quality (Ooms & Wilson, 2004), and does not address the parenting dimensions outlined above. Consequently, less is known about the efficacy of parenting education programs in low-income families.

The negative effects of SES on child outcomes may be buffered by effective parenting (Repetti et al., 2002). In a randomized control trial of the *Incredible Years BASIC* parent training program, income level was not a significant moderator of programmatic gains made by children and parents in the intervention group (McGilloway et al., 2012). It appears the negative child outcomes related to low SES may be mitigated by the efforts of parents armed with effective parenting skills. Cross-national effectiveness studies have even suggested the positive results associated with parenting education may be even stronger for children in low-income contexts and can improve their outcomes to equal that of their peers (Britto & Engle, 2015; Engle et al., 2011). In fact, in low-income countries, parenting education is one of the primary intervention points for promoting child development (Engle et al., 2011). However, inclusion criteria for low-income intervention studies vary widely from study to study and may include families with an income double the federal poverty level (Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010), making it difficult to directly assess the actual programmatic impacts experienced by the most-impoverished families, like the unemployed participants in this present study.

Potential Differential Effects

When evaluating a program such as this one, it is important to also look at whether the effects of the program differ significantly across any demographic groups (Bradford et al., 2015). Although prior studies have found consistent effect sizes across gender (Hawkins et al., 2008), a recent study similar to this one found that participant age, race/ethnicity, financial worry, and education level were not significant predictors of program effects (Bradford et al., 2019). Part of conducting ethical research is testing whether the program in question impacts any groups differently, as differential effects may be evidence that a particular group or groups are being underserved (Bradford et al., 2015). The present study will include analyses to test for possible differential effects across several demographic variables, such as participant age, race/ethnicity, gender, education level, divorce status, and household income level, as well as across different levels of perceived financial strain and parental stress.

Study Purpose and Hypotheses

Research suggests parenting education may have a significant positive effect on parent and child outcomes (e.g., Berge et al., 2010; Furlong & McGilloway, 2015; Kaminski et al., 2008). More specifically, higher levels of parental connection, autonomy-granting, and parental regulation have been consistently correlated to improved child outcomes (Barber & Xia, 2013; Darling, 1999). The *Love and Logic* program is designed to help parents better understand these three dimensions and adopt behaviors that support healthy connection, autonomy, and regulation within the parent-child relationship and reduce overall parental stress (Barber & Xia, 2013). Research suggests that as parents improve their understanding and applications of these dimensions, child outcomes will improve (Fay, 2012). However, it is unknown how the stresses associated with low income and unemployment will impact the perceived effectiveness of participation in the *Love and Logic* course. The purpose of this study is to examine the program's impact among low-income, unemployed participants. Relative to the quantitative analysis, we make the following hypotheses:

> (H1) Participation in the *Parenting with Love and Logic* program will improve parental perceptions of aptitude for connection, autonomy, and regulation while reducing parental stress within a sample of low-income, unemployed parents.
>
> (H2) Consistent with the findings of Bradford and colleagues (2019), it is anticipated that the programmatic gains described in H1 will not vary significantly by any demographic group (i.e., gender, education level, race/ethnicity).

In addition to these hypotheses, we also seek to describe qualitatively the lived experiences of the participants in the course using a phenomenological lens (Van Manen, 1997).

Methods

Sample and Procedures

Between August 2013 and May 2014, Utah State University Extension partnered with Utah's Department of Workforce Services (DWS) to provide a series of *Love and Logic* courses each month to unemployed individuals at nine DWS sites across the state. The courses were included as part of the DWS Work Success Program, which offers classes and trainings across a variety of subjects, from employment skills to personal and relationship-management skills. Program participants consisted of unemployed job-seekers who met the qualifications of current unemployed status and a household income below the Federal poverty guidelines. The present study explores the impact of those courses using participant feedback from a mix of methodologies. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Love and Logic* program within a population of unemployed parents. We seek to enhance the quantitative findings with qualitative descriptions of participant experiences. Accordingly, quantitative data were gathered to provide outcome-level insights related to the perceived efficacy of the program, while qualitative data were used to provide process-level insights through the lived experiences of the participants. This combination of methodologies is central to a complementarity approach (Carroll & Rothe, 2010) or convergent parallel design, as described by Creswell and Clark (2011), wherein researchers treat qualitative and quantitative methods as separate but interrelated paths toward understanding. Jones et al. (2019) highlight the strength of this mixed-method approach as it offers a multi-faceted understanding of the experiences of the program participants.

Program Delivery

The course content was divided into three two-hour sessions, which were taught once a week for three weeks to accommodate the needs of the DWS sites. The courses were offered free of charge as part of DWS's Work Success program. At the conclusion of the third week of training, voluntary surveys were conducted with both Likert-style quantitative items and several short-answer qualitative questions. Data collection was conducted with the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board.

Quantitative and Short-Answer Qualitative

Survey data was gathered in a retro pre-test, then post-test format. Participants were asked to complete each question according to their level of perceived parental efficacy both before and after they participated in the program. Although 896 adults participated in the program, fewer than 400 ($N = 372$) completed the survey. While this may appear to be a high percentage of attrition (41.5%), it reflects the nature of the Work Success program. Many participants did not attend all sessions, as they found employment, which ended their involvement with Work Success and the parenting course. As privacy limitations prevented the research team from

contacting those who left the program, precise numbers of how many participants obtained employment versus left Work Success for other reasons cannot be determined. However, anecdotal feedback from program participants, facilitators, and staff indicates that the vast majority of those who left Work Success did so upon starting a new job. Unfortunately, demographic information on program participants could only be collected at the end of the program, meaning there are no data to provide for a comparison between those who left the program and those who completed the course. As *Love and Log*ic was designed for parents and caregivers of minor children, the data for this study consisted of only the participants who identified as parents with minor children in the home (n = 267).

Qualitative Focus Groups

In addition to survey data, an in-depth qualitative evaluation was conducted using focus group data from one metropolitan and one micropolitan site to discern further information regarding the processes and impacts of the parenting course. As the program was being taught in both rural and urban sites across the state, the sites for the focus groups were chosen to be representative of both micro-and metropolitan sites and for their ease of access by researchers. Researchers interviewed participants immediately following the final sessions of the course at selected sites. The focus groups consisted of a semi-structured series of open-ended questions designed to elicit feedback on the participants' experiences in applying course content to their parent-child relationships. Focus group participation was voluntary, and a sack lunch and a $20 gift card were offered as an incentive for participation. There were 11 total participants (six from the metropolitan site and five from the micropolitan site) in the *Love and Logic* focus groups. The mean annual income for the program participants was less than $25,000, and all participants were unemployed when they participated in the course. See Table 1 for a full demographic breakdown of both survey and focus group participants.

Measures

Quantitative Measures

The quantitative measures consisted of items designed to assess parents' perceived levels of connection, autonomy, and regulation (Barber et al., 2005) in ways that align with the content of *Love and Logic.* A measure of parental stress management was also included as a global measure of overall perceived parenting stress. Measures were original to this study and constructed to directly assess the dimensions of connection, autonomy, regulation, and parental stress.

Perceived Connection. This construct was assessed using three items, the latter two of which were modified from the warmth subscale of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ; Robinson et al., 2001). Parents were asked how much they agreed with these statements: "I know how to express empathy even when my kids make poor choices." "I know how to respond to my kids' feelings or needs." "I know how to comfort and understand my

kids before enforcing limits." Participants answered on a five-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The items in this scale had good reliability with retro-pre and post-test alphas of .74 and .78, respectively.

Perceived Autonomy. This construct was assessed using three items. Parents were asked how much they agreed with these statements: "I know how to let me kids solve their own problems," "I know how to allow my kids to learn from their mistakes" (modified from Robinson et al., 2001), and "I know how to let consequences do the teaching." Participants answered on a five-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The items in this scale had good reliability with retro-pre and post-test alphas of .82 and .80, respectively.

Perceived Regulation. This construct was assessed using three original items. Parents were asked how much they agreed with these statements: "I know how to share control by allowing my kids choices within limits," "I know how to set enforceable limits," and "I know how to use logical, enforceable consequences in disciplining." Participants answered on a five-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The items in this scale had good reliability with retro-pre and post-test alphas of .77 and .82, respectively.

Perceived Parental Stress Management. This construct was assessed using three items (see Fay, 2012). Parents were asked how much they agreed with these statements: "I know how to have fun as a parent." "I know how to not feel stressed out as a parent." "I know how to stay calm when I have to discipline." Participants answered on a five-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The items in this scale had good reliability with retro-pre and post-test alphas of .75 and .77, respectively.

Qualitative Measures

Two types of qualitative data were used in this study. The short-answer qualitative data came from two items on the survey administered at the end of the course. In those items, the participants were asked to identify their biggest parenting concern before they began the course and the most important concept they learned during the course. Additional qualitative data came from the focus group interviews. In those sessions, the participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences both in the course and in applying the course principles in their parenting.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed through a combination of approaches. First, programmatic gains were assessed through paired-sample *t*-tests to test for significant differences in perceived understanding from retro-pretest to post-test. Then, a series of ANOVAs were run to examine

any variation according to demographic group differences. When between-group differences were found, Scheffe post hoc tests were used to explore these differences further. The focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed according to the procedure described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) to identify commonalities of experience and opinions. A phenomenological approach was used to study both written and interview data through the participants' lived experiences from their own points of view (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 1997). Two researchers independently reviewed and coded the short-answer and focus group responses, looking for emerging themes within and across each data set. Researchers honed their coding scheme for the short response data by independently coding a subsample of 60 responses from the 267 participants and then comparing and collapsing codes until they reached agreement. They then independently coded the entire data set. Kappa scores ranged from .82 to .97, indicating strong agreement between the coders (Viera & Garrett, 2005). A similar procedure was used for the focus group responses. However, since there were 11 total participants in the focus groups, all responses were coded in the initial phase and then compared and collapsed until a cohesive set of codes emerged. The final coding scheme was then used independently to recode the data. The Kappa for the six questions ranged from .80 to .86, again indicating strong agreement between the two coders.

Results

Demographics

Please see Table 1 for a list of demographics for the survey and focus group participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Parenting with* Love and Logic *Course and Focus Group Participants

	Survey	Focus Group
N	267	11
Gender (% female)	84.2	63.6
Current Age		
M (*SD*)	31.19 (*7.51*)	47.55 (*11.08*)
Median age	30	46
Race (%)		
Caucasian	69.6	72.7
African-American	3.9	0
Hispanic / Latino	17.5	18.2
Asian-American	.8	0
Native American	3.1	9.1
Other	5.1	0
Relationship Status (%)		
Married	29.7	45.5
Single	51.7	45.5
Dating	12.4	9.1
Engaged	6.2	0
Previously Divorced (%)	38.8	80.0

	Survey	Focus Group
Highest Grade Completed (%)		
Less than high school/ some HS	11.0	0
High school grad/ GED	39.0	27.3
Some college	22.0	27.3
College or technical degree	22.8	45.5
Graduate degree	5.1	0
Number of Minor Children Mean (*SD*)	2.15 (*1.20*)	2.82 (*1.94*)
Median Number of Minor Children	2	2
Annual Household Income Mean (*SD*)	$18,882 (*21.5K*)	$22,500 (*23.5K*)
Median Household Income	$10,000	$15,000
Worry Income is Not Enough (%)		
Never / hardly ever	4.1	
Once in a while	16.2	Not Collected
Often / almost all the time	79.7	
Attended Prior Relationship Education (%)	59.0	Not Collected
Number of Sessions Attended (%)		
1 session	36.3	10.0
2 sessions	26.3	70.0
3 sessions	37.4	20.0

Hypothesis 1

Our first hypothesis was that participation in the *Parenting with Love and Logic* program would improve parental perceptions of aptitude for connection, autonomy, and regulation and parental stress within a sample of low-income, unemployed parents.

Main Effects

Posttest and retro-pretest scores for each of the four outcome measures were compared using simple *t*-tests. There was a significant gain from retro-pre to posttest scores for connection (t = -23.44, $p < .001$), autonomy (t = -25.67, $p < .001$), regulation (t = -27.26, $p < .001$), and parental stress management (t = -20.69, $p < .001$). This indicates program participants felt they improved their parenting efficacy across these four parenting domains. Furthermore, participants felt better able to handle parenting stress due to the *Love and Logic* course (see Tables 2 and 3 for a full breakdown of main effects and differential effects).

Hypothesis 2

Our second hypothesis was that the programmatic gains (Hypothesis 1) would not vary significantly by any demographic group (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, education level, prior divorce, financial strain, income, age of the oldest child, prior participation in parenting relationship educations courses, and the number of class sessions attended).

Differential Effects

We next examined whether the main effects differed significantly across demographic groups. A series of ANOVA tests using the retro-pre to post-test change scores were run to examine differences in programmatic impact across several demographic covariates. No significant differences were found in programmatic gains by gender, age, ethnicity, education level, prior divorce, or financial strain; therefore, their results were omitted from Tables 2 and 3 due to length restrictions (full results are available upon request).

There were some small differences when comparing participants from different income levels (although all participants were unemployed at the time of the program, participants were asked to report their approximate total household income for the prior year as part of their demographic data). Participants in the lowest income quartile reported significantly higher mean pre-test scores on connection, autonomy, and regulation ($p = .013$, $p = .042$, and $p = .006$, respectively) than their peers in the other three quartiles yet reported significantly lower post-test scores for connection. Additionally, those in the highest income quartile reported significantly higher mean post-test scores on autonomy ($p = .042$) than those in the lower three quartiles.

Retro-pretest scores for connection, autonomy, and regulation reported the smallest gains for participants in the lowest income quartile. Limitations in the scope of the financial data available prevented further investigation of the differences between income groups.

There was a small differential effect of parental stress management based on the age of the participants' oldest child. Participants whose oldest child was in the preschool range (newborn to 4-years-old) reported significantly higher levels of stress management skills ($p = .016$) on the retro-pretest versus those whose oldest child was in the elementary or adolescent range.

After completing the course, parents of elementary and adolescent-aged children reported lower initial skills in managing parenting stress than participants whose oldest child was in the preschool range. Concepts introduced in the *Love and Logic* course, such as remaining calm while disciplining, fostering child autonomy, and regulating behavior, are skills that may be more salient for parenting older children. This may have influenced how parents of older children viewed their parenting skills prior to the course.

Finally, there were some additional small group differences related to dosage effects. Here, dosage refers to the amount of prior relationship education and the number of class sessions the participants attended. Specifically, those who had not participated in a prior relationship education course reported significantly lower rates of connection ($p = .046$) than participants with "some" or "a lot" of prior experience. Also, participants who attended all three course sessions reported significantly higher gains from retro-pre to post in autonomy and parental stress management ($p = .035$, and $p = .003$, respectively) than those who only attended one or two of the three sessions.

Table 2. Differences in Perceived Level of Parental Efficacy across Parenting Domains (Connection and Autonomy)

	Perceived Level of									
	Connection					**Autonomy**				
	Retro-Pre-Test Mean *(SD)*	**Post-Test Mean *(SD)***	***df***	***t***	***p***	**Retro-Pre-Test Mean *(SD)***	**Post-Test Mean *(SD)***	***df***	***t***	***p***
Main Effects	3.30 *(.79)*	4.55 *(.48)*	249	*-23.44*	*.000****	2.91 *(.86)*	4.47 *(.52)*	*230*	*-25.67*	*.000****
Variables			*df*	*F*	*p*			*df*	*F*	*p*
Income										
1st quartile	3.49 *(.80)*[a]	4.42 *(.57)*[b]	3	3.699	*.013**	3.10 *(.94)*[a]	4.41 *(.54)*[b]	3	2.778	*.042**
2nd quartile	3.26 *(.86)*[c]	4.60 *(.45)*[d]				2.93 *(.78)*[c]	4.45 *(.54)*[b]			
3rd quartile	3.23 *(.82)*[c]	4.52 *(.48)*[d]				2.86 *(.93)*[c]	4.46 *(.52)*[b]			
4th quartile	3.21 *(.67)*[c]	4.60 *(.42)*[d]				2.80 *(.77)*[c]	4.54 *(.46)*[d]			
Prior Relationship Ed.										
None	3.08 *(.79)*[a]	4.49 *(.51)*[b]	2	3.108	*.046**	2.76 *(.79)*	4.43 *(.54)*	2	1.938	*.146*
Some	3.40 *(.74)*[c]	4.56 *(.46)*[b]				2.95 *(.89)*	4.47 *(.52)*			
A lot	3.68 *(.81)*[c]	4.68 *(.42)*[b]				3.40 *(.83)*	4.61 *(.41)*			
Course Attendance										
Partial	3.28 *(.81)*	4.52 *(.48)*	1	.528	*.468*	2.94 *(.88)*	4.42 *(.54)*	1	4.482	*.035**
Full	3.27 *(.72)*	4.58 *(.48)*				2.80 *(.83)*	4.55 *(.44)*			
Oldest Child Age Group										
Preschool (0-4)	3.33 *(.71)*	4.52 *(.45)*	2	2.61	*.771*	3.02 *(.72)*[a]	4.42 *(.53)*[b]	2	2.418	*.091*†
Elementary (5-11)	3.27 *(.85)*	4.54 *(.49)*				2.82 *(.90)*[c]	4.47 *(.50)*[b]			
Adolescent (12-17)	3.29 *(.77)*	4.56 *(.51)*				2.89 *(.95)*[c]	4.50 *(.53)*[b]			

Note. Superscripts indicate Scheffe post hoc analyses examining between-group differences at each time point (i.e., perceived level of connection for first income quartile significantly higher than other quartiles at retro-pretest and lower than other quartiles at post-test).
† p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 3. Differences in Perceived Level of Parental Efficacy across Parenting Domains (Regulation and Parental Stress Management)

	Perceived Level of									
	Regulation					**Parental Stress Management Skills**				
	Retro-Pre-Test Mean *(SD)*	**Post-Test Mean *(SD)***	***df***	***t***	***p***	**Retro-Pre-Test Mean *(SD)***	**Post-Test Mean *(SD)***	***df***	***t***	***p***
Main Effects	3.05 *(.82)*	4.55 *(.51)*	244	*-27.26*	*.000****	3.09 *(.91)*	4.36 *(.61)*	*240*	*-20.69*	*.000****
Variables			*df*	*F*	*p*			*df*	*F*	*p*
Income										
1st quartile	3.33 *(.79)*[a]	4.48 *(.50)*[b]	3	4.271	*.006***	3.17	4.31 *(.63)*	3	1.508	*.213*
2nd quartile	2.94 *(.82)*[c]	4.52 *(.55)*[b]				*(1.05)*	4.37 *(.56)*			
3rd quartile	2.93 *(.87)*[c]	4.55 *(.53)*[b]				3.17 *(.81)*	4.33 *(.66)*			
4th quartile	3.03 *(.71)*[c]	4.60 *(.44)*[b]				2.91 *(.99)*	4.31 *(.62)*			
						3.06 *(.73)*				
Prior Relationship Ed.										
None	2.88 *(.84)*	4.48 *(.55)*	2	1.793	*.169*	2.96 *(.96)*	4.33 *(.57)*	2	.899	*.408*
Some	3.11 *(.78)*	4.59 *(.48)*				3.18 *(.85)*	4.38 *(.65)*			
A lot	3.44 *(.79)*	4.67 *(.38)*				3.17 *(.94)*	4.29 *(.55)*			
Course Attendance										
Partial	3.06 *(.81)*	4.53 *(.49)*	1	1.895	*.170*	3.17 *(.92)*	4.32 *(.65)*	1	8.731	*.003***
Full	2.97 *(.80)*	4.59 *(.50)*				2.93 *(.89)*	4.42 *(.52)*			
Oldest Child Age Group										
Preschool (0-4)	3.07 *(.67)*	4.52 *(.49)*	2	.769	*.464*	3.36 *(.76)*[a]	4.40 *(.61)*[b]	2	4.220	*.016**
Elementary (5-11)	2.96 *(.85)*	4.55 *(.50)*				2.96 *(.94)*[c]	4.37 *(.55)*[b]			
Adolescent (12-17)	3.13 *(.92)*	4.57 *(.53)*				2.96 *(.96)*[c]	4.27 *(.68)*[b]			

Note. Superscripts indicate Scheffe post hoc analyses examining between-group differences at each time point (i.e., perceived level of regulation for first income quartile significantly higher than other quartiles at retro-pretest but not significantly different from other quartiles at post-test).
† p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Qualitative Findings

In addition to the two previous hypotheses, researchers also sought process-related insights by examining and qualitatively describing the lived experiences of the participants in the course using a phenomenological lens (Creswell, 2013) to analyze two different types of qualitative data.

The qualitative findings are grouped according to the short-response questions, and emergent themes within each group are shown below alongside illustrative example responses from the short-answer and focus group participants.

Biggest Parenting Problem or Concern

Participants were asked to identify their biggest parenting problem or concern before the *Love and Logic* course. While there was a wide variety of responses, a few key themes emerged from their comments. The vast majority expressed a desire to learn how to help their children by encouraging responsibility, using correct discipline, setting limits, and using appropriate consequences as represented by the following quotes:

- "[I want to know] How to help my kids to make better decisions in their life. To help them to be good citizens."
- "[I want to know] How to raise a responsible, respectable child."
- "[I want to know how to] get [my children] to understand what they did wrong and learn from it."
- "[I want to know] How to set limits and enforce them. I struggle with making threats and giving too many warnings."
- "[I want to know] How to enjoy the parenting journey and help my daughter be the best she can be."

Another common theme was participants' concerns that they lacked the parenting skills needed to be effective parents, and they hoped the course would help them increase those skills:

- "[I want to know] If I'm doing good enough. Do I really know what I'm doing and what's going to happen if I mess up?"
- "Learning to parent without always being the bad guy, learning not to yell."
- "[I want to know] How to discipline my first child when acting out, without getting upset, overwhelmed."
- "[I] Just want to do right by my kids."
- "[I want to know] How to make quick parenting decisions under multiple stressful situations and how to teach them while staying calm.

These sentiments were echoed in the focus group responses when participants were asked why they chose to attend the course. Most respondents reported attending the course because they wanted to learn how to be better parents and build stronger relationships with their children:

- "[I want to know] how to be a better parent. I just want to be a good mother… and just want to know that I am doing my job well."
- "[I wanted to learn] how to handle my children. Instead of getting angry and yelling."

After the participants identified their biggest parenting problem or concern, they were asked *to what extent the program helped them* with that problem or concern. We include that quantitative finding here as it is directly related to the qualitative results above. On a 4-point scale from 1 (*None*) to 4 (*A lot*), the mean response was 3.58 (*SD* = .681), indicating a high level of program relevance and helpfulness with the problems and concerns most salient to our participants.

Most Important Parenting Concepts

Participants were asked to identify what they believed was the most important concept they learned in the *Love and Logic* course. Primarily, participants felt they learned to enact positive parental attributes, like patience, communication, and empathy:

- "I learned how to be empathetic and loving at the same time as allowing [my children] to learn."
- "[I learned to] let [my] child feel loved accepted unconditionally and feel valued in [our] family by making daily responsible contributions."
- "[I learned] to approach issues with empathy and let children problem solve themselves."

Second to those attributes, participants identified building autonomy and independence in their children as the most important concept they learned through the course:

- "[I learned] the importance of stepping back and letting kids make decisions for themselves and experiencing success/failure."
- "[I learned] that I don't have to know the answer right away, that I can let my children grow and develop through helping them make choices."
- "[I learned to] allow them to take responsibility for their own actions instead of them relying on [me] to always take care of it for them."

The focus group was asked a question about changes they had seen in their parenting while taking the course, with results complementing the findings above. Despite the relatively short course duration (only three weeks from first to last session), respondents reported having already seen signs of improvement in the skills they felt were most important:

- "[Because of the course] I am more patient with my son, I think. And I understand him a lot better and he actually listens to me now when I call him to do something."
- "[Because of the course] my daughter is being more independent, like doing things on her own and going and helping around the household a bit."
- "I believe with the tools that this program offers, the child is going to grow up better, more responsible in making their own choices. And I think, on the other side of it, the parent is going to be more calm, and there is going to be a greater communication between the parent and child, with these tools. Which in the outcome, produces a better relationship between the parent and child. Where, they become better individuals, but they also become a more united family."

Confidence in Continued Improvement

In addition to noting changes in their parenting that had already taken place, focus group participants also expressed an expectation of improved confidence, trust, and communication within their relationships with their children as a result of the skills they learned in *Love and Logic*:

- "[I expect] to communicate with my son better so that when he gets older he won't be afraid to come to me and say 'mom, this is what happened today' and this course has helped with that."
- "[I now feel confident] letting them make choices for themselves, that's a relief for me, knowing that I can do that now, and that it's ok to do it and that there's a good way of doing it."

Complementarity of Results and Discussion

Despite the long history of the *Love and Logic* program, this study is among the first to evaluate the program's impact (Fay, 2012). Consistent with hypothesis 1, quantitative data showed significant post-test improvement in participants' perceived connection, autonomy, regulation, and parental stress management. Furthermore, consistent with hypothesis 2, the improvements in those areas experienced by the participants did not significantly vary across a number of demographic variables. The results suggest this sample of low-income parents (median annual income: $10,000–$15,000) were able to make significant gains in their reported parenting efficacy through participation in *Love and Logic*. This is significant as past research suggested income may facilitate the parenting dimensions of connection and autonomy by removing socioeconomic stressors, which may reduce parent-child interactions (Clark & Ladd, 2000). These results further suggest the applicability of including *Love and Logic* in a location offering employment or training services to a low-income population (i.e., Department of Workforce Services), supporting the work of Shirer and colleagues (2004).

In terms of complementarity of the findings, perhaps the most striking feature is what the qualitative data underscore. Prior to the program, parents' concerns seemed to focus largely on worries about regulation and setting limits (e.g., teaching responsibility, correcting behavior) and concerns about themselves as parents (e.g., being good enough, not getting angry). After the program, in contrast, the focus seemed to be first on connection and secondarily on autonomy. Parents emphasized they had learned how to be empathic, accepting, communicative, and focused on the parent-child relationship. In terms of autonomy, they noted they learned to be more patient, to facilitate child responsibility, and to allow their children to make and learn from their own choices.

Limitations

This study used a retro-pretest then post-test design rather than a pretest-posttest method. Some scholars have shown that retrospective designs are susceptible to biases like faulty recall and cognitive distortion (Hill & Betz, 2005). However, other scholars have shown empirically that true pre-test ratings are susceptible to response shift bias (where participants overestimate their pre-test knowledge); in these cases, program impact is underestimated (Bradford et al., 2016). Thus, a retro-pretest then post-test design can serve as a protection against response-shift bias in data collection (Rohs, 1999). Other important limitations include the lack of a control or comparison group and the study's cross-sectional design. Finally, the high rate of attrition in the participants is also a limitation. While having over 41% of the participants depart the program may not be ideal for program evaluation purposes, it is important to remember that in most cases, participants dropped out of the Work Success program due to securing employment. Although this may stand as a testament to the Work Success program's efficacy in helping the unemployed reenter the workforce, it does not create an ideal situation for program-evaluation research. Unfortunately, high attrition may be a practical reality of implementing parenting courses through the Department of Workforce Services, where participants are actively trying to get out of the program by securing employment. These real-world limitations may be part of offering relationship education through partner organizations. Future studies with unemployed populations may address these limitations through single-day courses designed to maximize retention, control/comparison group designs, the use of longitudinal data, and the incorporation of data outside of self-report measures (observational data or spouse/children surveys).

Conclusion and Implications

These findings from unemployed participants in the *Love and Logic* course offer a number of insights for parenting educators and researchers. Although the findings should be interpreted with caution, the results show that financial challenges did not present a barrier to parenting skill improvement. Thus, the findings suggest that professionals may offer such programing to socioeconomically diverse participants without fear of a disparity in program impact. The results suggest the effectiveness of parenting education among participants in low-income brackets.

Finally, this collaboration between Extension professionals and the Department of Workforce Services demonstrates the possibilities and benefits of Extension partnering with existing agencies to deliver programming to vulnerable populations. Such partnerships allow the accessibility of programs to participants who may otherwise not be served.

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