




DEVELOPMENT OF PARENTING SKILLS IN A SCOPE OF GROUP SOCIAL WORK*

Anahit Sahakyan , ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0862-4032>
PhD, Vice Dean, Faculty of Sociology, Associate Professor, Department of Social
Work and Social Technologies, Yerevan State University, Armenia.
E-mail: anahit.sahakyan@ysu.am

Anna Voskanyan , ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8826-8911>
Lecturer, Department of Social Work and Social Technologies, Yerevan State
University, Armenia. E-mail: voskanyan.anna@ysu.am

Liana Mkrtychyan , ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3820-3039>
Lecturer, Asistent, Department of Social Work and Social Technologies, Yerevan State
University, Armenia. E-mail: lianamkrtychyan@ysu.am

Abstract: Parenting skills play a crucial role in shaping children's development and well-being. This article presents a comprehensive review of the literature and research on the development of parenting skills, focusing on various factors influencing parenting practices, interventions aimed at enhancing parenting skills. In order to study the native experience of developing parenting skills, the program of group work implemented in 2022-2023 in "Shogh" community-based children's day centers operating under the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA) was presented. The mission of the researched project was to form a conscious and positive approach to parenting in Armenia, and the goal was to develop the parenting knowledge and skills of parents of school-age children. For its evaluation, 2 main methods were used: "Before and after" evaluation and "The most significant change" survey, after which a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained results was performed. The authors argue that a review of both theoretical and research literature indicate that the development of parenting skills has a direct impact on the child's socio-psychological development, on the dynamics of family relationships and, in general, on the child's well-being and social responsibility.

Key words: *child development, parenting skill, parenting styles, parent-child relationship, social group work, theory of attachment*

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Անահիտ Սահակյան, ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0862-4032>

Հոգեբանական գիտությունների թեկնածու, ԵՊՀ սոցիոլոգիայի ֆակուլտետի փոխդեկան, սոցիալական աշխատանքի և սոցիալական տեխնոլոգիաների ամբիոնի ղոցենտ: Էլ. փոստ՝ anahit.sahakyan@ysu.am

Աննա Ոսկանյան, ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8826-8911>

ԵՊՀ սոցիալական աշխատանքի և սոցիալական տեխնոլոգիաների ամբիոնի դասախոս: Էլ. փոստ՝ voskanyan.anna@ysu.am

Լիանա Մկրտչյան ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3820-3039>

ԵՊՀ սոցիալական աշխատանքի և սոցիալական տեխնոլոգիաների ամբիոնի ասիստենտ: Էլ. փոստ՝ lianamkrtchyan@ysu.am

Անփոփում: Ծնողավարման հմտությունները վճռորոշ դեր են խաղում երեխաների զարգացման և բարեկեցության ձևավորման գործում: Հոդվածը ծնողավարման հմտությունների զարգացման վերաբերյալ տեսական և հետազոտական համապարփակ ակնարկ է՝ կենտրոնանալով ծնողավարման պրակտիկայի վրա ազդող տարբեր գործոնների, ծնողավարման հմտությունների բարձրացմանն ուղղված միջամտությունների վրա: Ծնողավարման հմտությունների զարգացման հայրենական փորձի ուսումնասիրության համար ներկայացվել է Ամերիկայի հայ ավետարանչական ընկերակցության (ԱՀԱԸ) ներքո գործող «Շող» երեխաների համայնքահեն ցերեկային կենտրոններում 2022-2023 թթ. իրականացված խմբային սոցիալական աշխատանքի ծրագիրը: Հետազոտվող ծրագրի առաքելությունն է եղել ձևավորել Հայաստանում ծնողավարման գիտակցված և դրական մոտեցում, իսկ նպատակը՝ զարգացնել դպրոցահասակ երեխաների ծնողների ծնողավարման գիտելիքներն ու հմտությունները: Դրա գնահատման համար օգտագործվել է 2 հիմնական մեթոդ՝ «Առաջ և հետո» գնահատում և «Ամենանշանակալի փոփոխությունը» հարցումը, որից հետո կատարվել է ստացված արդյունքների քանակական և որակական վերլուծություն: Ընդհարացնելով հարկ է նշել, որ թե՛ տեսական, թե՛ հետազոտական արդյունքները վկայում են, որ ծնողավարման հմտությունների զարգացումը անմիջական ազդեցություն ունի երեխայի սոցիալ-հոգեբանական զարգացման վրա, ընտանեկան փոխհարաբերությունների դինամիկայի վրա և երեխայի բարեկեցության և հասարակական պատասխանատվության վրա ընդհանրապես:

Բանալի բառեր - երեխայի զարգացում, ծնողավարման հմտություններ, ծնողավարման ոճեր, ծնող-երեխա փոխհարաբերություններ, խմբային սոցիալական աշխատանք, կախվածության տեսություն

РАЗВИТИЕ РОДИТЕЛЬСКИХ НАВЫКОВ В РАМКАХ ГРУППОВОЙ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ РАБОТЫ

Анаит Саакян, ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3820-3039>

Кандидат психологических наук, заместитель декана факультета социологии, Ереванский государственный университет, Армения. Эл. почта: anahit.sahakyan@ysu.am

Анна Восканян, ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8826-8911>

Преподаватель, Кафедра социальной работы и социальных технологий, Ереванский государственный университет, Армения. Эл. почта: voskanyan.anna@ysu.am

Лиана Мкртчян, ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3820-3039>

Ассистент кафедры социальной работы и социальных технологий, Ереванский государственный университет, Армения. Эл. почта: lianamkrтчyan@ysu.am

Аннотация. Родительские навыки играют ключевую роль в формировании развития и благополучия детей. В данной статье представлен обширный обзор литературы и исследований по развитию родительских навыков, с основным акцентом на различные факторы, влияющие на практику воспитания, и на интвенции, направленные на улучшение родительских навыков. Для изучения национального опыта развития родительских навыков была представлена программа групповой социальной работы, реализованная в 2022-2023 годах в общинных центрах для детей "Шох", действующих при Армянской миссионерской ассоциации Америки (АМАА). Миссией исследуемого проекта было формирование осознанного и позитивного подхода к воспитанию детей в Армении, а целью было развитие знаний и навыков по воспитанию у родителей школьников. Для его оценки были использованы два основных метода: оценка "До и после" и опрос "Наиболее значимое изменение", после чего был проведен количественный и качественный анализ полученных результатов. Как теоретические, так и исследовательские результаты показывают, что развитие родительских навыков имеет прямое воздействие на социально-психологическое развитие ребенка, на динамику семейных отношений и, в целом, на благополучие и социальную ответственность ребенка.

Ключевые слова: *развитие ребенка, родительские навыки, стили воспитания, отношения родителей и детей, социальная групповая работа, теория привязанности*

Introduction

Although the term "parenting" has not been circulating in the academic arena for a long time, it has been widely discussed by socio-psychological disciplines. Renowned parenting researcher Jane Brooks defines parenting as the process of supporting and promoting a child's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development from infancy through adulthood (Brooks, 2012: 2). At the same time there is concept that parenting starts in prenatal period (Bertin, 1992: 2).

Parenting is the set of actions to raise a child not only in the context of biological, but also psychological and social relations. According to Raisa Ovcharova, parenting is an integral psychological construct of an individual's personality, encompassing a set of value orientations, attitudes and expectations, parental feelings, relationships and positions, parental responsibility and parenting styles. Each of these components contains cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements (Ovcharova, 2005: 13).

Parenting can be considered as a biological, psychological, and sociocultural phenomenon, and as a social institution, it includes two institutions: fatherhood and motherhood, as an activity carried out by a parent in the care, upbringing and education of a child, as a stage in the life of every human being that begins from the moment of conception of the child. In a narrow sense, parenting is the performance of the parental role, the content

of which has undergone certain transformations over time: from the implementation of a parenting style, in which the child is required to be absolutely submissive to the parents, to such a quality of the parent-child relationship, where the child has been given greater freedom and independence. Moreover, this freedom is accompanied by the awareness of certain limits, that is, taking into account the demands of others. In the framework of psychological science, it is considered as a system of relations between a parent and a child, which contributes to the personal and emotional development of both the child and the parent (Nesterova, 2005: 20). Thus, parenting can be interpreted as a behavioral system that is part of the responsibility of a parent, the purpose of which is to ensure the physical, social-psychological, and economic well-being and development of the child.

The core theories and concepts dedicated to this topic can be divided into three dominant approaches:

- 1) Attachment approach;
- 2) Social learning approach;
- 3) Parenting styles approach.

Attachment approach

Proponents of attachment theory rely on several conceptual systems, the main one being John Bowlby's attachment theory. Bowlby and his associates studied the nature, meaning, and, in particular, the functions of child-parent bonds and relationships. This approach addresses fundamental issues of safety, security and emotional protection. According to attachment theory, in a broad sense, the possibility of creating an optimal, safe attachment of the child depends on the quality of parental care, the sensitivity and response of the parent, which in turn forms a positive model of the child's "I". Such an individual can both love and support others and be loved. According to this theory, before school age, a partnership is formed between the child and the adult, with goal setting, in which the child's independent exploration and attachment needs are balanced. The parent helps the child maintain this balance by teaching him to listen, respond to others, and agree on common goals. According to Bowlby and his associates, this balance is needed at all ages. Additionally, attachment patterns and characteristics are passed down from generation to generation (Braet, 2009).

A secure attachment formed in childhood has a protective role that is very important for the child's later development. As shown by a number of long-term studies, it enables the development of socially desirable models of the child's behavior and the formation of psychological stability. Furthermore, if a child has a reliable attachment experience with at least one adult during early childhood, it can protect him from psychopathological deviations, even if there are future traumas.

Social learning approach

The social learning approach is one of the most influential theories of parenting today. It is closely related to Albert Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism and well-known research on behavior formation. The social learning theory of parenting was pioneered by Gerald Patterson, founder of the Center for Social Learning in Oregon, USA, and his associates (Patterson et al., 1989). In his analysis, Patterson proceeds from the premise that children learn aggressive behavior during interactions with other family members. Patterson admits that other factors have an influence on the formation of the child's personality, such as the educational level of the parents, the family's financial

situation, and ethnicity, but if the child becomes aggressive under the influence of the family, then there is a tendency for him to have socially inadequate manifestations outside the family as well. In addition, among the negative family influences, the parent's reaction to the child's antisocial behavior takes the first place. After more than ten years of research and observation, Patterson and his colleagues concluded that parents of antisocial teenagers typically fail in the following four functions:

- 1) Ensuring the discipline of children, both in the family and outside the family;
- 2) Prevention of antisocial behavior of children;
- 3) Encouraging children for socially desirable behavior;
- 4) Effective problem-solving.

Moreover, these parents often fail in all the mentioned areas at once. According to Patterson, people who practice such ineffective parenting tend to show their intolerant, aggressive behavior towards family members in the presence of the children themselves, reinforcing similar behavior patterns in the child. Such parents often ignore the constructive behavior of children, and when punishing for unwanted behavior, they do not specify what they are being punished for.

In general, proponents of this approach believe that a child learns behavioral strategies based on the feedback he receives in response to his behavior. And the child-parent relationship and the family environment are considered the most significant resource for such a response. In the early stages of its development, this approach focused on the study of aggressive behavior and conflict formation, and later this theory was developed by the British psychologist Francis Gardner and his associates. They developed programmes for shaping positive parenting behavior as a basis for shaping child behavior and emotions, emphasizing the emotionally positive aspects of the parent-child relationship.

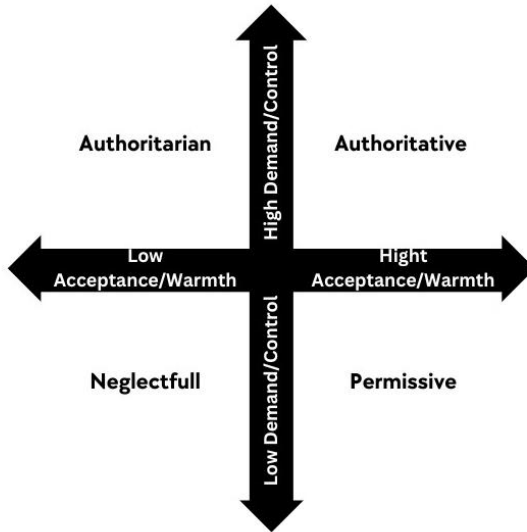
Parenting styles approach

This approach mainly comes from Diana Baumrind's research, based on which the author identified three main styles of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative and permissive (Li, 2024). The mentioned styles are formed from four main components.

- 1) maturity requirement for children;
- 2) control;
- 3) communicativeness (communication);
- 4) emotional intimacy.

Maccoby and Martin (Maccoby & Martin, 1983: 78-79) reformulated Baumrind classification. They identified two main dimensions of intrafamily interaction: levels of acceptance/warmth and demands/control. The intersection of these two levels forms four types of parenting, thus adding another type to Baumrind's classification: the neglectful/indifferent parent (White & Woollett, 1992: 143-146). According to supporters of this approach, the parenting style has a great influence on the formation of the child's future behavior.

Authoritarian parents strictly control their children, command and expect their orders to be followed without discussion. They make very high demands on children and do not show tenderness and love. They do not explain and do not empathize with the child, do not care, and do not take into account the latter's opinion and wishes. As a result of authoritarian parenting, children have low self-esteem, find it difficult to communicate with peers, adjust to society, tend to be passive and dependent on others, and show high situational aggression.

*Diagram 1***The Four Parenting Styles**

Permissive parents accept the child as he is, and do not control and limit his behavior. Such parents can be both emotionally open and close to the child, as well as cold and indifferent. In general, children of parents with a permissive style have difficulty controlling their own behavior, tend to follow their whims, are immature, and can often show hyper-aggressive behavior if they encounter obstacles.

Baumrind notes that both of the above parenting styles can produce nearly identical results. That is, the child's

social and cognitive competence is low, and he is not ready to cooperate and overcome life's difficulties. (Baumrind, 1991: 62-75) In the case of authoritarian parenting, the child is deprived of initiative abilities, and in the case of indulgent parenting, the child is deprived of self-criticism abilities. In other words, self-governance abilities are affected in both cases.

An authoritative parenting style is characterized by a high level of acceptance and control. Those with this parenting style are warm to children, teach them important life skills, and are able to control their behavior by explaining cause-and-effect relationships. They are ready to listen to the child and include him in decision-making according to his abilities. This kind of parenting forms in children responsible, mature behavior, high self-esteem, and confidence in their own abilities, they are effective in the fields of cooperation and self-governance. This style of parenting is more constructive and preferable.

The most destructive style is considered neglectful parenting. Such parenting is characterized by neglect of the child's needs and interests. Children feel abandoned and this feeling can persist throughout their lives. Children brought up in this style have low self-esteem, are impulsive, often exhibit antisocial behavior.

Thus, analysts of parenting styles prove in their research the inevitable impact of parenting on various areas of a child's life. Furthermore, there is a body of research that shows the impact of parenting quality on such important areas of a child's life as educational outcomes, physical and mental health and development. It can be concluded that the nature of parenting affects the qualitative characteristics of generations and that the future of society depends on the quality of parenting.

Therefore, the question of teaching parenting knowledge and developing the skills of parents has become urgent and, in some sense, fashionable. In recent years, training courses aimed at parenting have been carried out by psychologists and social workers in

Armenia. They are mainly implemented within the framework of the activities of non-governmental organizations whose purpose is the protection of children's rights. In state institutions, schools, and kindergartens, trainings are carried out only at the initiative of the director or at the discretion of the class teachers.

International experience in developing parental skills

Discussing the research efforts that have explored the effectiveness of parenting interventions adds an interesting layer. In this context, it's noteworthy to mention the long-term study conducted by Irish Researchers M. Furlong, S. McGilloway, T. Bywater, J. Hutchings, S. M. Smith, and M. Donnelly. In the framework of the latter, the possibilities of developing parenting skills through cognitive-behavioral group work were explored. For a comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of parenting interventions, the participating parents were divided into two groups based on the principle of randomness. The first group participated in the programme from its inception, while the second group (the control group) attended workshops 4-10 months later. The impact of group work on children's behavior, development of training participants' positive parenting skills, and rejection of negative (violent, neglectful, etc.) parenting was assessed during the programmes, at the end of the programmes, and 3-12 months after them. Information about changes was collected both through independent observers and by parents (Furlong et al., 2012: 5-10). Among those programmes were the following.

The 4 programmes of Webster-Stratton, which were implemented in 1984, 1988, 1997 and 2004. The first programme was implemented with 40 parents (mothers of 3-8 year-old children). If necessary, along with group work, individual work was also carried out with parents (Webster-Stratton, 1984: 666-678). Within the framework of the second programme, 114 mothers participated in the group work, but the information was also collected from 80 fathers. This time, the impact of group work on the psychological health of parents was also evaluated (Webster-Stratton et al., 1988: 558-566). In the third programme, the component of children's participation in group work was added, as well as child-parent joint group work. Both mothers and fathers participated - a total of 97 parents (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997: 93-109). In the fourth programme, group activities were also organized for parents-teachers and children-teachers. 159 parents took part in this programme (Webster-Stratton et al., 2004: 105-124).

Barkley's programme, which was implemented in 2000, was carried out separately with both children and parents and then the work continued in mixed groups. In total 158 parents participated in this programme (Barkley et al., 2000: 319-332).

Braet's programme (Braet et al., 2009: 223-240), where group work was carried out with 64 parents of children aged 4-8 years. Separate work with children was not carried out. Several other programmes were implemented along the lines of the Webster-Stratton programme, but the emphasis was placed only on working with parents. Among them was Gardner's programme (Gardner et al., 2006: 1123-1132), where a total of 76 parents of 2-9-year-old children were included in group work. The Hutching's programme, which was implemented in 2007 with 153 mothers of 3-4-year-old children. McGilloway's programme for 149 parents of 3-8-year-old children (McGilloway et al., 2009) and Scott's 2001 the programme (Scott et al., 2001: 194), which was implemented with 141 parents of children of the same age as McGilloway's.

Analyzing the results of the researches listed above, the authors concluded that the

group work aimed at developing parenting skills carried out with a cognitive-behavioral approach not only contributes to the development of positive parenting skills and the reduction of behavioral problems in children, but also leads to a decrease in the use of negative parenting and improvement of the psychological health of parents (Furlong et al., 2012: 33-38).

Application of group social work for developing parental skills in Armenia

In 2022-2023, social workers from the "Shogh" community-based children's day centers, operated by the Armenian Missionary Association of America (AMAA), implemented a program utilizing socialization group social work. The mission of this program was to cultivate a conscious and positive approach to parenting in Armenia. Its primary goal was to enhance the parenting knowledge and skills of parents with school-age children.

The sub-goals of the project were the following:

- Enhance awareness among parents about the rights and needs of children.
- Enhance parental understanding of their responsibilities and rights.
- Improve parental knowledge about the developmental milestones of children.
- Familiarize parents with the principles of positive interaction with children and develop skills for its implementation.
- Introduce the consequences of child abuse and exclude violence from the parenting process.

The project was implemented in Gyumri, Vanadzor and Yerevan through group work using educational and socializing approaches. A total of 53 parents participated. During the group work the characteristics of children's age development, parenting styles, rules and principles of parenting, conflict resolution methods, and several other topics related to parenting were discussed with parents.

Most of the meetings took place in an offline format, and some meetings were held online. Moreover, through social media, additional materials on the presented topics were also posted for participants.

Project evaluation was carried out using the following methods:

- "Before and after" evaluation by group work participants. Through this method, participants compare their orientations, knowledge, and skill levels before and after participating in group work. For the most effective use of the method, at the beginning of the group work, a survey is made about the attitudes of the participants and expectations from the group work. After the work is completed, these expectations are recalled and assessed to see how well they were met.
- "The most important change" method (Daves & Dart, 2005: 6). Group participants are asked to answer the following question: "What is the most significant change that has happened to you as a result of being included in this group?" A content analysis of the responses was performed.

Assessment of group work results

The evaluation revealed that only 50% of the parents considered physical punishment, as well as scolding and insulting, an unacceptable means of disciplining their children. After the meetings, 100% of the parents unequivocally expressed their opposition to such methods of discipline. Some parents also noted that before the group

work, they had used these methods of discipline without realizing their negative impact on children. After the group work, they completely gave up on them. Instead, as the main means of managing children's behavior, parents mention talking to the child about his behavior and explaining the consequences of that behavior, and if this does not work, as a means of punishment, parents prefer to temporarily deprive the child of favorite things (mainly the phone, the Internet, at an earlier age depriving them of toys).

Before the implementation of group work, 40% of parents believed that children's right to make their own decisions should be strictly limited, and children's decisions should always be in line with their parents' ideas. Thanks to the meetings, 85% of the parents already realize that the child definitely has the right to make his own decisions regarding his person. According to 55% of parents, the child should have this right from an early age, and 30% believed that the child acquires this right when he starts to take responsibility for his decisions. The remaining 15% were inclined to think that parents should play a major role in children's decision-making, but they were more open to the idea of listening and taking into account children's opinions at work. 90% of the participants considered that parents should act as advisors, not as limiters or enforcers, in the matter of decision-making.

90% of the participants also stated that they started to treat children's problems much more seriously, realize their importance, and perceive them not only from their own point of view, but also from the children's point of view. The majority consider that children's problems are as significant as those of adults. According to some parents, the children's problems are more important than theirs, and some added that the children's problems are part of the parents' problems.

Before the group work, 40% of the parents believed that the child should have a certain fear of the parent, and after the meetings, 100% of them agreed that the basis of the child-parent relationship should be mutual trust and respect. According to the participants, the child should not be afraid of the parent, but recognize his authority, which should be earned during contact and cooperation with the child.

After the group work, 90% of the parents began to perceive the relationship with the child as a two-way process. If until that time 50% of parents, when referring to their relationship with their child, talked more about the latter's responsibilities, and acceptable or unacceptable behavior, now they talk about the parents' behavior and the formation of positive relations with the child.

100% of group work participants were very satisfied with their participation. The parents noted that the group work was conducted at a high level. The experts presented the material in an accessible, simple, understandable and interesting manner, actively involving all participants in the discussions. In addition, they were grateful for the free atmosphere of the meetings, where they could freely share their experiences and opinions with other participants and the moderator. Parents were particularly pleased with the fact that the moderators were always ready to support them and answer all questions.

Since the assessment of major changes and achievements in parents' lives is qualitative information, it is presented in the form of parents' opinions and reflections. According to parents, they:

1. Discovered for themselves what "child having a personal space" means.
2. Received a lot of new knowledge about children, their development and rights.
3. Have become more measured and patient in relations with children.

4. Have learned to be restrained, because in the past they could often flare up quickly, get angry, and in the case of some parents, also hit their children.

5. Have begun to look more deeply at the causes of conflicts between themselves and their children. They strive to understand their origins and find mutually effective solutions to these conflicts.

6. Have learned to listen and understand children, take into account their opinion.

7. They regard themselves, their parental role and responsibilities in a new way.

8. They take a number of issues more seriously, both related to raising children and everyday life, to which they did not pay much attention in the past.

9. They acknowledge that they were wrong in some issues and strive to correct them.

In general, parents definitely felt the positive effect of group work on the relationship between them and their children. In addition, they expressed a desire to continue relations with specialists in one or another format. It should be noted that the researching programme achieved its goals by changing the attitude of the participants regarding the rights of the child and violence against them, confirming the inadmissibility of the latter.

Conclusion

This comprehensive article has shed light on the critical role of parenting skills in shaping children's development and well-being as a main part of parental responsibility in society. Through an analysis of existing literature, we have highlighted the multifaceted nature of parenting, emphasizing the importance of attachment, warmth, responsiveness, and consistency in fostering positive parent-child relationships and promoting healthy child outcomes. Thus, within the framework of this article, the results of the analysis of the research data are presented, based on which the main features are as follows:

- Intrnational experience of parenting of the 4 programmes of Webster-Stratton, which were implemented in 1984, 1988, 1997 and 2004, shows: the authors concluded that the group work aimed at developing parenting skills carried out with a cognitive-behavioral approach not only contributes to the development of positive parenting skills and the reduction of behavioral problems in children, but also leads to a decrease in the use of negative parenting and improvement of the psychological health of parents.

- To sum the Armenian experience of parenting up, the researching programme achieved its goals by changing the attitude of the participants regarding the rights of the child and violence against them, confirming the inadmissibility of the latter.

- This article effectively summarizes the key findings of the review and highlights the implications for policy, practice, and future research in the field of parenting in Armenia. Moving forward, it is crucial for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to collaborate in promoting parenting skills development for the responsible society.

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