



What is a Realist Review?

A **realist review** is a research method by which a large and diverse collection of academic literature is identified by key word searches. Relevant articles are appraised and those chosen are assessed based on the concept, “what works for whom, under what conditions”.¹ Realist reviews help to inform policy revision, design effective interventions, and identify potentially effective and innovative approaches, particularly when dealing with complex issues facing public health.

¹ Pawson, R. Evidence-based policy: A realist perspective. London, England: Sage Publications Ltd; 2006.

Background

The *Nurturing the Next Generation* (NTNG) research project includes three realist review papers (Parent Education, Social Connectivity, Social Marketing) that synthesize the evidence effective population-based interventions for families transitioning into parenthood from the prenatal period to the end of the first year of life. The results of these realist reviews will inform Family Health’s decision-making process for the NTNG strategic priority.

Question

What are the population-level parent education interventions that public health can realistically do to support early child social, emotional, and cognitive development from the prenatal period to the end of the first year of life?

Overview of the Search Process

- The initial search identified 1477 articles. Articles were included if they focussed on parent education programs that were designed and implemented at a universal level. Articles were excluded if they involved extensive teaching through home visiting.
- 78 papers formed the basis of the findings and were assessed using the criteria ‘what works for whom, under what conditions’.

Parent Education: Realist Review

Findings

- There is no one population-level parent education intervention that results in improved child development outcomes.
- Parents appreciate a menu of services and need ‘just in time’ information, that is flexible with convenient options for accessing what they need, when they need it.
- Increased knowledge does not necessarily result in behaviour change.
- Parenting education classes are not an effective strategy for most parents as evidenced by high attrition and low engagement.
- Group education can be effective for some parents when led by engaging and knowledgeable facilitators.

Recommendations

- Meet parents where they are at and provide a ‘just in time’ menu of services at places where they are already frequenting.
- Reaching and engaging parents require the use of strategies that incorporate adult learning principles.
- Programing should aim to be participant-driven, reflect parental experiences and incorporate the unique needs of fathers.
- Program evaluation should be rigorous and include measures of family and child development outcomes rather than parental satisfaction and parent reported behaviour change.
- Develop versatile and effective facilitation skills among staff who deliver services and group education.

