



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 for 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?

Definition

Social connectivity is defined as family and community connections in the early parenting environment that provide actual and/or perceived support.

Overview of the Search Process

- Over 1500 papers were reviewed by title and abstract
- 27 papers formed the basis of the findings.

Social Connectivity: Realist Review

Findings

- **Community connections:** Formal and semi-formal supports are useful to families and can lead to sustained, valuable informal connections. Agency attempts to connect parents must incorporate family-friendly approaches, community development, relationship building, empowerment, and respect for diversity. There is value in ‘coming together’ as a goal in and of itself.
- **Internet connections:** Internet-based social networking sites have the potential to provide pregnant and parenting families with informational support.
- **Prenatal connections:** Prenatal classes combined with prenatal care offers opportunities for social connections in a location where pregnant mothers and families are already going. These connections are sustained over time.
- **Father connections:** Dads value the opportunity to connect with other fathers in a ‘fathers-only’ prenatal environment. While father-inclusive practices have been identified, dads have often been overlooked as a specific audience for early years’ supports and services.

Recommendations

- Recognize the important role of social connections in the promotion of healthy child development.
- Consider interventions that provide information and promote social connections for families.
- Explore the role of public health in fostering social connections for families through programs and services.
- Engage with fathers in different ways than with mothers.
- Consider the role public health can play as experts in community development, program planning and evaluation.
- Work with community partners to reinforce the message that social connectivity is a valid and valuable goal of programming for parents.

