



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 marketing is the application of marketing techniques to interventions that have specific behavioural goals to improve health. A social marketing strategy begins with a specific behaviour change goal, and uses audience analysis, segmenting, and the four Ps of marketing (**P**roduct, **P**rice, **P**lace and **P**romotion) to develop an effective campaign.

Overview of the Search Process

- A search of both published and grey literature (from 2000-2011) was conducted.
- Parents were the population of interest and social marketing was the intervention.
- 600 citations were reviewed by title and abstract. Papers were included if they focused on parents of young children and adhered to social marketing principles. Papers were excluded if they targeted parents of older children.
- 74 papers formed the basis of the findings, and 16 of them were reviewed.

Social Marketing: Realist Review

Findings

- In the literature, many social marketing campaigns focus only on “Promotion” and are more accurately described as ‘social advertising campaigns’.
- There are significant gaps between social marketing theory and practice.
- Using social marketing interventions to target parents of young children is an underdeveloped strategy.
- There is some evidence of success in specific areas including breastfeeding, smoking cessation during pregnancy, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) prevention and car seat safety.
- Social marketing campaigns that target parents are effective when they make clear to parents that *not changing their behaviour* poses risks to their children.
- Few campaigns focus on support for parents or on positive social, emotional and cognitive infant development.

Recommendations

- Recognize that Peel parents are a diverse audience that requires analyses of their needs.
- Favour social marketing campaigns that use both media and face-to-face strategies to reach disadvantaged populations and/or ethnically diverse audiences.
- Recognize that parent-focused social marketing campaigns work for parents when behaviour is easy to change, when they address barriers to change and when community-based strategies are prioritized for disadvantaged/diverse audiences.
- Ensure health professionals are targeted in appropriate and specific ways.

