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## STEP Parenting: A Review of the Research

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### ABSTRACT

In response to Dinkmeyer, McKay, and Dinkmeyer Jr.'s (1990) claim that individuals were incorrectly reporting Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) as being ineffective, and recent claims of STEP being ineffective (e.g., Taylor & Biglan, 1998), the purpose of this article was to review the research and statements made about STEP's effectiveness. This review looked at the issue of STEP being effective from several research perspectives and concluded Dinkmeyer et al.'s claims of STEP being effective were not supported by the research. Additional suggestions for improving practitioner's acceptance of parenting systems and procedures with scientific validation are also included.

### RÉSUMÉ

En réponse aux allégations de Dinkmeyer, McKay et Dinkmeyer fils (1990) selon lesquelles certaines personnes soutenaient à tort l'inefficacité de la formation *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP)* (Formation systématique menant à de bonnes compétences parentales), et pour faire suite aux imputations plus récentes d'inefficacité du programme STEP (par ex. : Taylor et Biglan, 1998), cet article avait pour but d'examiner les travaux de recherche et les déclarations au sujet de l'efficacité de ce programme. Cet examen a porté sur la question de l'efficacité de la méthode STEP vue selon plusieurs perspectives de recherche et a permis de conclure que la recherche ne soutient pas le point de vue de Dinkmeyer *et al.*, qui prétendent que la méthode STEP constitue un programme efficace. Des suggestions sont aussi avancées à l'intention des conseillers praticiens visant à les encourager à accepter des systèmes ou méthodes de formation au rôle parental reposant sur des données scientifiques.

In 1989, Ratzlaff, Friesen, Neufeld, and Paddock made the following statement concerning Dinkmeyer and McKay's (1976) *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP)*:

A number of other researchers have evaluated the effectiveness of S.T.E.P., an Adlerian-based skill training program. Findings from studies by Steed (1971), Berrett (1975), Kierans (1976) and Nordal (1976) reported no evidence of significant change in parental attitudes concerning the parent-child relationship using the S.T.E.P. program (p. 167).

In 1990, Dinkmeyer Sr., McKay, and Dinkmeyer Jr. took issue with the Ratzlaff et al.'s (1989) statement and noted, "This statement is incorrect and a disservice to the reader. We wish to state the record concerning STEP research,

accurately” (p. 103). Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) then go on to argue that: (a) STEP was not published until 1976 so Steed (1971) and Berrett (1975) “predate the release of STEP” and therefore “have nothing to do with STEP,” and (b) Nordal’s (1976) article refers to Adlerian parent training without specifically mentioning STEP.

Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) claim there is a large body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of STEP. They briefly describe three journal articles, three dissertations, and one Australian government report containing data suggesting parental attendance at STEP workshops increased positive parent attitudes about the parenting principles that are part of STEP.

Dinkmeyer et al. conclude their article with the following statement:

Accuracy in research reporting is important in helping readers evaluate the effectiveness of various approaches. Inaccurate reports create false impressions. The STEP parent education programme is effective, research substantiates this, and the reader should be informed of these facts (p. 105).

In 1998, Taylor and Biglan report a serious problem in the mental health profession where society is being encouraged to use scientifically unsupported parenting approaches and procedures instead of those parenting approaches and procedures that have empirical support. They identify STEP as one of the scientifically unsupported approaches that society is being encouraged to employ. Taylor and Biglan go on to say the mental health professionals familiar with empirical research findings on the various parenting approaches and procedures have a responsibility to provide society, and the mental health profession in general, with a more accurate picture of their effectiveness.

In response to Dinkmeyer et al.’s (1990) statement that inaccurate reports create false impressions and are a disservice to those concerned about parenting, the purpose of this article is to review the published research on STEP and look more closely at the claims for and against the effectiveness of STEP made by Ratzlaff et al. (1989), Dinkmeyer et al. (1990), and Taylor and Biglan (1998).

#### STEP HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ADLERIAN PARENTING

The first issue Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) address concerning Ratzlaff et al.’s (1989) statements about STEP being ineffective has to do with Steed (1971) and Berrett’s (1975) articles being published before STEP’s actual release date in 1976. While it is true *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* was not published until 1976, Dinkmeyer and McKay authored and published *Raising a Responsible Child* in 1973, which taught the same parenting concepts later written in STEP. Both *Raising a Responsible Child* and STEP teach parents to understand and accept their child’s behaviour, emotion, and life-style, while applying correct discipline techniques, encouragement, reflective listening, and democratic family structure. The two publications are so similar that we could find little material in the STEP (1976) manual that was not presented, in more detail, in the 1973 publication. The main difference seemed to be format related because STEP

(1976) was created in a practical, workbook format with 117 pages and only three references, while *Raising a Responsible Child* was written in a more comprehensive theoretical format with 247 pages and 14 references. The publication of this material (e.g., Dinkmeyer, & McKay, 1973), that supposedly was not released until 1976, would allow three of the studies cited by Ratzlaff et al. (1989) to be timely.

As a second issue, Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) distance STEP from comparative research studies involving Adlerian parenting techniques and prominent Adlerian psychologist, Rudolf Dreikurs, claiming they “*did not* involve STEP” (p. 103). However, a review of STEP manuals and texts shows this claim to be both erroneous and misleading for two reasons. First, STEP manuals and texts repeatedly make direct reference to the parenting techniques of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs. In the 1973 precursor to STEP, Dinkmeyer and McKay reference Adler or Dreikurs eight times, accounting for 57% of their total references. Of the three references found in the STEP (1976) manual, Dreikurs is referenced twice and acknowledged as the authors’ “teacher, friend, and source of encouragement.” In STEP/Teen, Dinkmeyer and McKay (1983) make 15 out of 54 total references specifically to Dreikurs, and in the STEP parenting guide for parents of young children, Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) reference Adler and Dreikurs six times out of 33 total references. Clearly, Adlerian parenting viewpoints and principles are an integral part of STEP’s theoretical beginning, practical workbook applications, and present-day development.

Second, it is also important to note that Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) publication, entitled *Children: The Challenge*, was specifically and falsely targeted by Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) as not having anything to do with STEP. A careful review of Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) and the STEP manual (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976) reveals they are almost conceptually identical. Both publications are directed toward parents and provide them with helpful instructions and anecdotes, facilitating the application of an Adlerian based parenting system. Both begin by explaining the reasons why children misbehave: to gain attention, power, revenge or retaliation, and to demonstrate inadequacy (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976, p. 8-11; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964, p. 58-65). Both publications proceed to explore the parent-child relationship and offer parenting techniques to render the “four goals of misbehaving” futile. Additionally, both teach parents about equality, having fun with children, encouragement, communicating acceptance, child life-style, communication, active or reflective listening, avoiding punishment and rewards, using natural and logical consequences, being firm but kind, facilitating child independence, being consistent, sharing responsibility, and holding family meetings or councils (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964).

Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) openly refer to Rudolf Dreikurs as their teacher “from whom [they] learned much of what [they] know about parents and children.” A systematic review of texts clearly demonstrates that Dreikurs and Soltz (1964), published a decade earlier than STEP, is associated with and influenced the creation of STEP, a parenting system theoretically based on and directly linked to Adlerian psychology. Based on these conclusions, it is difficult to

understand why Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) would make such an effort to try and distance STEP from Adlerian parenting principles when STEP is so strongly based on Adlerian ideas.

#### EMPIRICAL SUPPORT FOR STEP'S EFFECTIVENESS

Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) make the claim that there is a substantial body of research supporting the effectiveness of STEP. For the remainder of this study, the effectiveness of STEP is decided through the evaluation of STEP-related research along four dimensions: (a) whether attending STEP workshops creates positive changes in parents' attitudes, (b) whether parental use of STEP creates a more healthy psychosocial development in children, (c) whether use of STEP produces behaviour changes in children, and (d) whether or not specific behaviour change procedures advocated by STEP have empirical support.

#### *Positive Changes in Parental Attitudes*

As mentioned before, Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) offered seven studies to support their claim that STEP parenting workshops produce positive attitude changes in parents. Dembo, Sweitzer, and Lauritzen's (1985) review of ten studies on STEP provides support to Dinkmeyer et al.'s (1990) claim, suggesting STEP education programs change parent attitudes. However, not all research agrees. Jackson (1982), de Sherbinin (1981), and Jackson and Brown (1986) all found STEP education programs to yield minimal or no changes in parental attitudes.

It is important to note that although parental attitude changes could play some role in changing children's behaviour, showing that parental attitude changes after class instruction is not enough to demonstrate the effectiveness of a parenting program. Taylor and Biglan (1998) remind their readers that attitude changes do not necessarily translate into more effective parenting or positive behaviour changes in children.

Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) make no effort to show the consequent effects of positive parental attitude change on children's behaviour. Also, in Dembo et al.'s (1985) analytical review dealing with Adlerian and STEP parenting programs, they make note of the relative absence of research linking positive parental attitude change with changes in children behaviour, stating:

Parental attitude measures generally indicated that child-rearing attitudes were positively influenced by Adlerian parent education programs, but there was little indication that children's behaviour changed as a result of their parents' education (p.180).

Taylor and Biglan's (1998) point that parental attitude changes do not necessarily translate into children's behaviour change seems to be reinforced by the fact that studies showing change in parental attitudes from parents taking STEP workshops are not showing changes in children's behaviour (Jackson, 1982; Jackson & Brown, 1986; Campbell & Sutton, 1983; Hinkle, Arnold, Croake, & Keller, 1980; McDonough, 1976; Croake & Burness, 1976; Berrett, 1975; Frazier & Matthes, 1975).

### *Positive Psychosocial Development*

Parenting approaches that teach parents to abstain from using punishment or rewards (e.g., STEP, Parent Effectiveness Training) claim to provide children with an environment more conducive to healthy psychosocial development. Ellison (1996) confirms this position by claiming punishment free parenting programs, like STEP, provide parents with goals that “emphasize healthy psychosocial development – the cultivation of positive self-concept, confidence, and social skills” (p. 6). He goes on to claim parenting systems that advocate the use of punishment and rewards teach parents submission training as the “preeminent goal” (p. 6).

In STEP research, the main measure used to define “healthy psychosocial development” has been a measure of change in children’s self-esteem. Using measures of child self-esteem, research has not yet determined if STEP produces healthy psychosocial development in children. Dembo, Sweitzer, and Lauritzen (1985) found one research study showing STEP to be effective in improving children’s self-esteem (Hinkle et al., 1980), but Jackson (1982), de Sherbinin (1981), Jackson and Brown (1986), and Esters and Levant (1983) all found evidence showing parental use of STEP does not increase children’s self-esteem. Similarly, Meredith and Benninga (1979) found STEP training did not improve children’s self-concept, another proposed aspect of psychosocial development.

Although some individuals, like Hinkle et al. (1980), have suggested STEP is effective in altering children’s self-esteem, self-esteem measures provide a relatively weak attempt at capturing the lofty concept of healthy psychosocial development. In most cases, the ability of administered self-esteem measures to truly “measure” the abstract concept of self-esteem has not yet been substantiated.

### *Child Behaviour Change*

Two analytical reviews of parenting systems found little evidence to suggest STEP is effective in positively changing children’s behaviour (Dembo, Sweitzer, & Lauritzen, 1985; Mooney, 1995). Additionally, several studies have shown STEP and Adlerian parent training do not affect children’s behaviour (Jackson & Brown, 1986; de Sherbinin, 1981; Campbell & Sutton, 1983; Jackson, 1982; Hinkle, et al., 1980; McDonough, 1976; Croake & Burness, 1976; Berrett, 1975; Frazier & Matthes, 1975).

We found only two studies that show STEP instruction improves behaviour. Esters and Levant (1983) reported STEP instruction improved grade-point average in rural, low-achieving 3rd and 4th grade children; and, Freeman (1975) found parents observed less annoying behaviours in children as a result of STEP instruction. Freeman showed STEP instruction was better than no parental instruction, however, both studies failed to show STEP was more effective than other administered parenting systems.

Currently, no substantial body of evidence exists that shows STEP training changes children’s behaviour. In fact, there is such consistency in the research showing no behaviour change with STEP that this review supports Taylor and Biglan’s (1998) statements: “STEP was disseminated widely before it was evaluated” and is a “popular-press program which has spread widely without empirical

support" (p. 52). It appears that the creators of STEP and those mental health professionals promoting its use need to correct their claims and provide potential users with a more accurate description of the empirical evidence surrounding STEP.

### *Specific Behaviour Change Procedures*

STEP teaches parents to replace punishment and rewards with natural/logical consequences, reflective listening, and communicating acceptance when they attempt to modify child behaviour (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976, 1983, 1989). In response to the many behaviour changing techniques being introduced by innovative parenting systems like STEP, Educational Testing Services commissioned a task force (Weber, Crawford, Roff, & Robinson, 1983) to rate specific alternative discipline procedures and techniques for use on children. In their review of 62 strategies employed to manage children, Weber et al. (1983) found no empirical support for behaviour changing, parenting techniques advocated by STEP (e.g., reflective listening and logical consequences).

In contrast, parenting procedures condemned by STEP, such as the use of punishment and rewards, were reported as being supported by "strong empirical evidence" (Weber et al., 1983). Weber et al.'s (1983) conclusions are substantiated by the findings of learning textbooks (e.g., Hilgard & Marquis, 1940; Hulse, Egeth, & Deese, 1975; Kingsley & Garry, 1957; Mazur, 2002; Pierce & Epling, 1999; Schwartz, 1989) and empirical punishment reviews (Axelrod and Apsche, 1983; Azrin and Holz, 1966; Walters and Grusec, 1977), which consistently show punishment and rewards to be effective behaviour change techniques.

#### PROVIDING EVIDENCE ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE

Mental health professionals have an ethical responsibility to provide data on both sides of an issue. In their effort to "state the record concerning STEP research," Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) failed to provide the reader with the evidence both for and against the effectiveness of STEP. Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) claim "a large body of research on the effectiveness of STEP on various dimensions" exists, but they only provide one-sided information on the issue of parental attitude change. Dinkmeyer et al. (1990) did not include in their study: (a) evidence showing STEP does not change parental attitudes, (b) evidence showing STEP does or does not affect children's psychosocial development, (c) evidence showing STEP does or does not positively change children's behaviour, (d) evidence showing empirical support for STEP behaviour change techniques, or (e) evidence showing punishment and rewards are effective, contrary to STEP claims.

#### CONCLUSION

A closer look at research findings and specific statements made does not support Dinkmeyer et al.'s (1990) claim that Ratzlaff et al. (1989) incorrectly cited

research findings as indicating STEP is ineffective in producing parent attitude changes.

Taylor and Biglan (1998) point out several parenting approaches are incorrectly being presented to society as if they were based on scientific research findings when they are not. STEP was one of those parenting approaches mentioned by Taylor and Biglan, and the research presented in this article support their contention.

Dawes (1994) refers to his personal experiences in state and national psychological associations along with citing numerous studies to support his concern that professional practitioners in psychology tend to ignore psychological principles supported by research. According to Dawes "far too much professional practice in psychology has grown and achieved status by espousing principles that are known to be untrue and by employing techniques known to be invalid" (p. vii).

Taylor and Biglan (1998) call for research-oriented mental health professionals to demonstrate more initiative in getting parenting research information before the public. It appears that it would also be a good idea for journals to encourage submitters to be more diligent when advocating a parenting approach by presenting relevant research containing evidence both for and against that approach. Practitioners can benefit from more comparative research reviews concerning procedures and approaches in which they are currently interested.

Although practitioners in general are not directly involved in parenting research, it seems important to remind ourselves to be cautious about accepting parenting procedures and systems without requiring the advocates to provide an overall representative picture of the relatively current experimental research related to a parenting issue, or provide some relatively rigorous ex post facto scientific analysis of historical information. Again, coming in contact with comparative research reviews such as this one of research reported in past published articles should benefit practitioners.

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