

## Fighting Toxic Stress Side-by-Side with Parents

Benjamin Kearney, PhD \* Brittany R. Pope, MS \* Holli Ritzenthaler, MSSA \* Georgianna Gray, MSSA \* Vincent Schiavone, PhD  
The Institute of Family & Community Impact, an OhioGuidestone Company (Cleveland, Ohio)

### Background & Objective

We noticed a growing problem with devastating effects in our communities:  
**TOXIC STRESS** in Children!

Toxic Stress leads to an over-active stress response system, developmental delays, and greater risks of mental and physical illness - including early death! Research pointed out that Toxic Stress could be combated by increasing resiliency, but exactly how?

- Could the everyday work of Early Childhood Professionals beat Toxic Stress?
- Could Parents maximize every day moments to build resiliency?
- Could we strengthen Children through what they do best: *play*?

About Joyful Together<sup>®</sup>:

- Therapeutic program that coaches parents/caregivers to play more *with* their children;
- Based on science that demonstrates that positive, loving experiences can lead to increased resiliency;
- Created for early childhood professionals to model to parents during already scheduled in-home or community-based appointments;
- Doesn't require much: just parent and child, and some joy!

Research Objectives:

After 6 sessions of Joyful Together<sup>®</sup>:

Would Caregivers report **lower stress scores** ?  
*and*

Would Children have **improved protective factors (resiliency)**?

### Methods

**Intervention Group:**

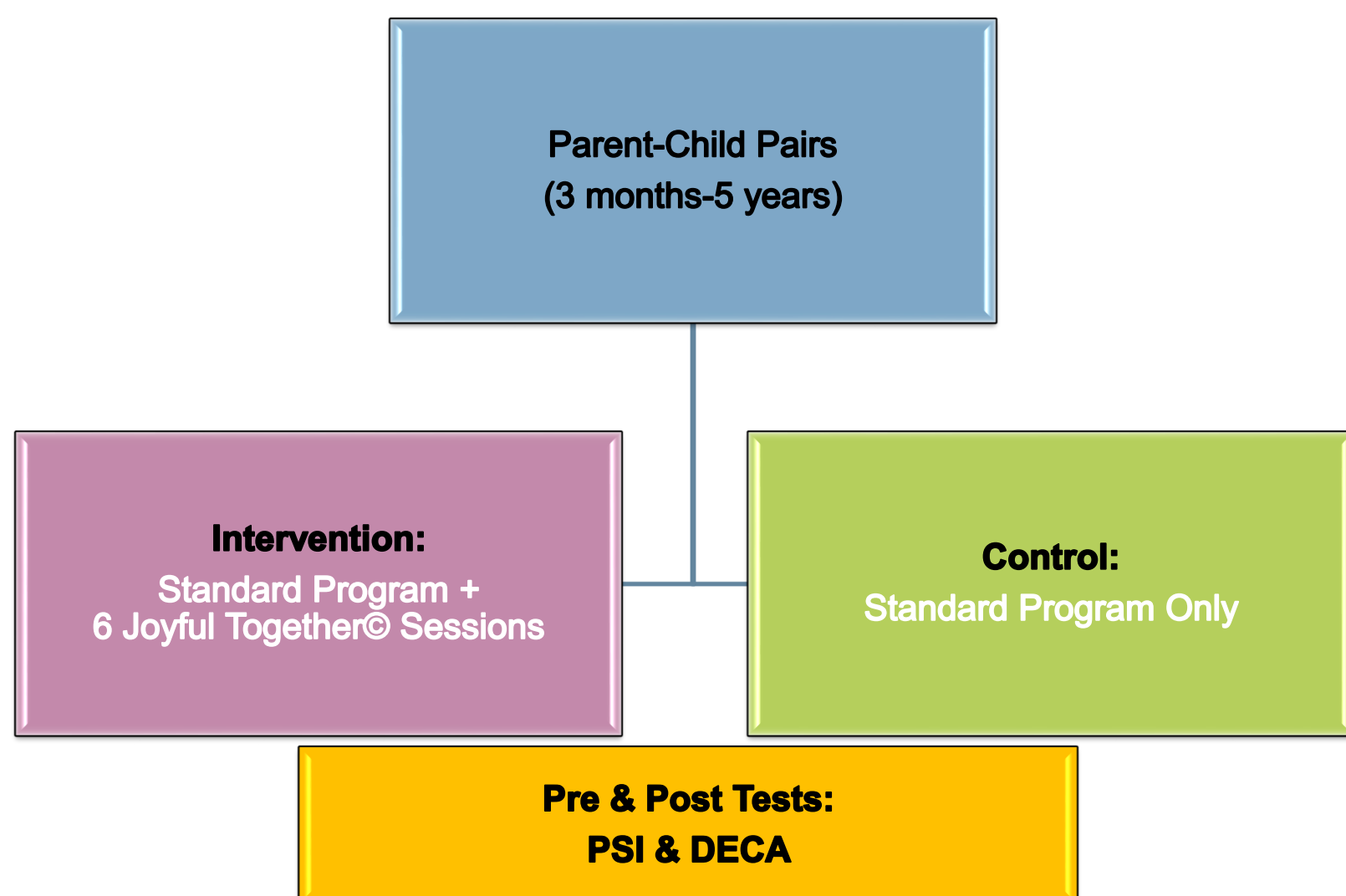
- 6 weekly/biweekly in-home appointments
- Modeled 2-3 Joyful Together<sup>®</sup> activities
- Coached Parents/Caregivers to do as many activities daily (use Joy Calendar)

**Materials:**

- **100+ Joyful Together<sup>®</sup> Starter Activities**
- **Parent Stress Index Form (PSI-SF4)**
- **Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA: 1-18m, 18-36m, 3-5 Versions)**
- **Joyful Together<sup>®</sup> Joy Calendar** (sticker chart)

#### Randomized Control Trial

*Help Me Grow, Early Childhood Mental Health and Childcare Center*



### Results

Joyful Together<sup>®</sup> Lowered Parent Stress and Increased Childhood Total Protective Factors. Key results are highlighted below.



#### Parent Stress

- **Intervention Group Parents: Lower Total Stress scores** averaging in the "Typical" stress range. (Intervention Group n=17)
- **Control Group Parents: Increased Total Stress scores** averaging in the "High" stress range. (Control Group n=12)



#### Relationships

- **Joyful Together<sup>®</sup> Activities decreased stress that impacts Parent-Child relationships.**



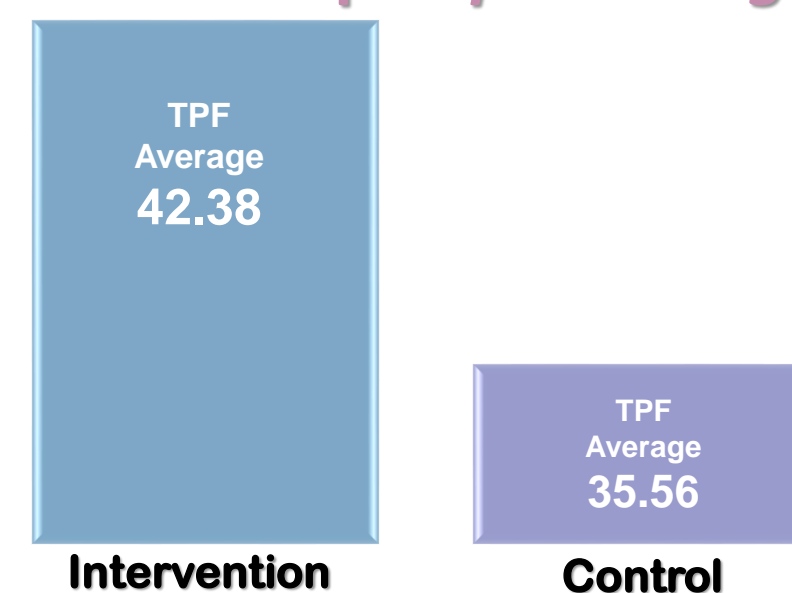
#### Loving Touch

- **Touch activities significantly impacted social-emotional regulation scores in children.**



#### Childhood Resiliency

DECA- Total Protective Factors (TPF)  
**Intervention Group Improves Significantly**



- **Intervention Group Children: Significantly higher Total Protective Factor scores**, averaging in the "Typical" range. (Intervention Group n=8)
- **Control Group Children: Scores remained in the "Needs Attention" range.** (Control Group n=9)



**Joyful Together**

Lowers Parent Stress, Improves Relationships,  
& Increases Childhood Resiliency!  
Early Childhood Professionals and Parents/Caregivers  
can make lifelong positive impact!

More Joyful Together<sup>®</sup> Research:

- Impact on the Stress Response System by measuring pre & post Cortisol (stress hormone) levels.
- Impact on Families using Joyful Together<sup>®</sup>.
- For More Information or Materials: [research@ohioguidestone.org](mailto:research@ohioguidestone.org)

#### Select References

- Center on the Developing the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011). *Building the Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape Development of Executive Function: Working Paper No. 11.* <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>
- Narvaez, D., Panksepp, J., Schore, A. N., & Gleason, T. R. (2013). Evolution, early experience and human development from research to practice and policy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Panksepp, J. (2010). Affective neuroscience of the emotional BrainMind: evolutionary perspectives and implications for understanding depression. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 12(4), 533-545.
- Perry, B. & Ludy-Dobson, C.R. (2010). "The Role of Healthy Relational Interactions in Buffering the Impact of Childhood Trauma." in Working with Children to Heal Interpersonal Trauma: The Power of Play. The Guilford Press.