

## Introduction

- Empathy is an affective response that is elicited by observing or imagining another's emotional state (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Eisenberg, 2010).
- Research on empathy development in children has largely been focused on *negative empathy* or responses to others' distress (Dadds et al., 2008) with less attention on positive empathy, or experiencing happiness because of others' happiness.
- To address this gap in research and to encourage positive empathy in youth, SHAPE JOY (Socializing Happiness and Promoting Empathic Joy in Our Youth) was conceived and developed.
- We seek to determine if a parent-mediated program may strengthen positive empathy in young children, and if nourishing empathic happiness can set them up for a compassionate and prosocial life (Bosovski, 2010; Mezulis et al., 2004).

## Research Question

We expected that from week zero to week six of SHAPE JOY, mindful parenting and emotion coaching practices will increase in parents and positive empathy and prosocial behavior will increase in children.

## Participants

### Sample

- N= 9; families that completed up to Week 3 of the SHAPE JOY Program
- Children were between the ages of 4–6 ( $M = 5.93$  years). Children's ethnic/ racial background was predominantly White (77.78% White, 11.11% Black, and 11.11% Asian). 8 of the children are female and 1 is male
- Parents racial/ethnic background match that of child participants. Parents mostly identify as cis-gender women (88.89%) with one parent identifying as non-binary (11.11%). 6 parent participants are married, 1 parent is divorced, and 1 is a single guardian
- The income of families varied (1 family earns between 18,000–49,000/year, 3 families earn 50,000–99,000/year, 4 families earn 100,000–200,000/year, and 1 family earns >200,000/year).

### Eligibility Screening

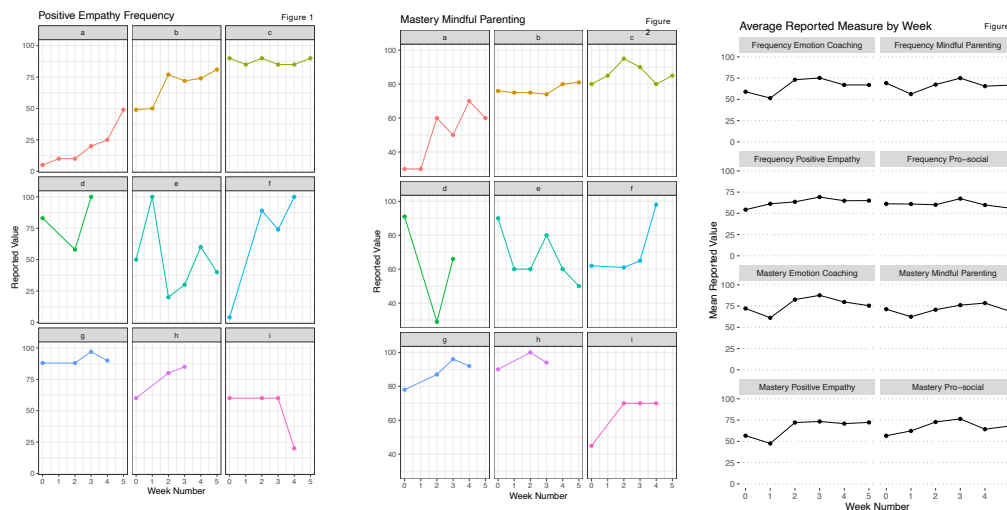
- Families were eligible when they meet the following criteria:
  - child is between the ages of 4 and 6 years;
  - parent and child speak English fluently;
  - access to technology that allows families to record and view videos;
  - the child does not have major cognitive, language, or other developmental delays that would prevent them from engaging in the study;
  - at least one parent is willing to engage in weekly activities for 6 weeks with the identified child and complete the two virtual assessment meetings.

## Methods

Eligible families were consented into the study and completed a pre-assessment. For the next 6 weeks, a new set of parenting and child-related emotion skills were introduced, and parents completed weekly surveys to evaluate mastery, engagement, and knowledge of skills central to the program including mindful parenting, emotion coaching, child positive empathy, and child prosocial behavior. One question for each skill was asked each week and scored on a scale from 0 to 100 with 0 indicating "I/my child could NOT do this skill" and 100 being "I/my child could do this skill."

Data from nine (n=9) families that have completed at least 3 sessions were used to examine mean-level differences and individual trajectories across time.

## Results



## Analysis

Our plots are preliminary as our study is on-going. Currently, our data suggests variable patterns of change in positive empathy and mindful parenting, with some families reporting expected increases and others not.

The plots above represent individual participant trajectories for children's positive empathy frequency and parents' mastery of mindful parenting.

Participant data was combined to generate an average which I then plotted (Figure 3).

## SHAPE JOY Program Design

- SHAPE JOY is a virtual 6-week parent-guided program.
- Weekly modules include: educational empathy information, descriptions of the child's skill and parenting tip, a summary of the module, and exercises to teach and reinforce the skills throughout the week.
- During the weekly visits, a knowledge quiz is administered to evaluate family engagement/comprehension of SHAPE JOY content.



## Discussion

- Our research is an attempt to fill a gap in research on positive empathy. In the past, research has largely been focused on negative empathy which has led to minimal attention given to positive empathy and how it might be encouraged in the context of the parent-child relationship.
- SHAPE JOY aims to increase empathic joy through a six-week parenting program that teaches mindful parenting and child-focused emotional and prosocial skills. We hypothesized that our program would produce increases in mindful parenting and emotion coaching practices in parents and increased positive empathy and prosocial behavior in children.
- Data obtained on self-reported measures are limited, and these data may be impacted by socially desirable responding, extremity bias, and modality bias.
- The items used in this study were adapted loosely from parent-report behavioral rating scales measuring mindful parenting and children's empathy that have strong internal consistency reliable and convergent and divergent validity.
- Participants may have been able to recalibrate reporting to be more representative of concepts described within each module.

### Limitations

- Weekly surveys are self-report and subject to reporter-bias and subjectivity.
- Small population and sample with limited generalizability (WEIRD sample). Additionally, our participants all had access to the internet and met technology requirements.
- Interference by training (practice effects) and fatigue.
- Conclusions from our findings are difficult to ascertain due to the on-going nature of our study.

### Future Directions

- Future research should aim to incorporate both subjective and objective measures to capture the mechanisms involved in positive empathy (e.g. Personality Inventory tests, low-intensity intervention suitable for children, and/or physiological measures)
- Future empathy interventions should aim to create materials that are accessible by a broader range of participants addressing accessibility issues posed to marginalized groups (e.g. disabled, racial/ethnic minority groups, low SES)
- An RCT (randomized control trial) should be used in empathy interventions to isolate the causal effects and establish a statistically relevant comparison group
- It is critical to identify characteristics that may enable a participant to benefit more/less from positive empathy interventions to create a more equitable and adequate study design. Such factors may include relationship status of parents/guardians, if children are members of more than one household (resulting from parental divorce and remarriage), family size and/or child's birth order, child's age, gender, and measures that capture parenting style. These factors may influence child participation and pose challenges to study precision.

## Selected References

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