



## *PEOPLE IN RECOVERY MAY BE BETTER PARENTS, STUDY SHOWS*



Nancy Kepple was curious. As a parent who is in recovery, she wanted to know if the process of recovering from substance use could be helpful for parenting.

Kepple, Ph.D., MSW, and assistant professor at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, has spent her career studying substance use. Now, she wanted to look at the parenting experiences of Kansans who were at different stages of the recovery process to see if what they learned in recovery impacted how they parent their children.

Kepple just concluded her research, and the preliminary findings have both surprised and pleased her.

“My prior research showed the parenting behaviors among parents in recovery were as good as or better than other parents, with lower frequency of child abuse and neglect,” she explains. “In this most recent study, I’m seeing that some of the same skills parents learned in recovery, like asking for help, emotional regulation, controlling impulses -- all those things that help them maintain recovery -- transfer to their parenting.”

As part of her study, Kepple surveyed 150 parents in Kansas City, Topeka, Lawrence, and surrounding rural communities who have been in recovery between three months and 14 years. She also conducted 25 in-depth interviews with a subset of the parents. Her findings are rebutting the commonly held beliefs that people who have used drugs are worse parents and that parenting is a stressor that can put people at higher risk for relapse.



Kepple is pleased that she can shed light on issues surrounding substance use in Kansas through her research. She believes it's essential for more research to be done in the state, since Kansas faces unique challenges and opportunities not usually measured by substance use studies, which typically focus on urban areas.

“Kansas experiences things related to drugs and substance use in a different way than the national narrative, from the type of drugs to the timing of the drug use and resources available for treatment,” she says. “That’s why it’s so important to study what is going on here. The prevention-based work needs to be tailored to the realities of Kansas.”



# RESEARCHER WORKING TO SAFELY

# REUNIFY SUBSTANCE ABUSE AFFECTED

# FAMILIES IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEM



“Kids want to be with their parents,” says Jody Brook, Ph.D., MSW/LCSW. As a leading researcher in the nation focused on child welfare and parental substance use, Brook is working hard to see that children in foster care are safely reunified with their families because, she says, “Every day a child experiences family separation may mean accumulated trauma.”

Since parental substance abuse is a leading cause of children entering foster placement, Brook, an associate professor at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, is studying how to equip these parents with the skills they need to provide a safe environment for their children.

In 2019, Brook concluded a five-year study in Kansas that tested the effectiveness of an evidence-based intervention -- the Strengthening Families program -- at helping families reunify more quickly and more successfully. The study involved parents and their children under age 4 who were at risk of or currently experiencing out-of-home placement.

During the study, parents attended a Strengthening Families class for 14 weeks in one of six sites throughout the state. At the weekly meetings, the parents spent quality time bonding with their infant or toddler, playing, cuddling, and sharing a meal. They also learned about child development and how to provide a safe home environment for their children.

“Strengthening Families allows you to build on who your family is and rewrite your narrative. It’s very empowering,” Brook says. “It’s wonderful for the parents, and it’s usually the highlight of the week for the children. We had one little boy who would wake up at four in the morning on the day of group, get himself dressed and pull on his boots, waiting for group.”

While she is still analyzing data from the study, Brook has high hopes for this intervention. She’s already seen the powerful results of Strengthening Families in Kansas. From 2007 to 2015, she helped implement the program statewide for families with children 3 years and older.

As a result of the intervention, she says, “We know that families were reunited over 200 days faster, and that the reunifications were successful over the long term.”

Not only did families benefit, the state also saved valuable resources by returning children to their homes. “Days equal dollars for the state,” Brook explains. “What we know from our earlier study is that Strengthening Families is an extremely cost-effective program: Based on conservataive estimates, for every \$1 spent, it saves \$9. So, this intervention is a win for everyone involved.”





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