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Validation, Training, and Implementation of an Observational Assessment Tool of Maladaptive Parenting for Use in Applied Settings with Families at High Social Risk

Despite the significant resources that governments and non-state institutions worldwide have dedicated to identifying children who are most at risk developmentally, there remains a discernable lack of coherent, empirically-based, and standardized assessment tools that can be implemented in community agencies. The most validated marker of negative child outcomes is maladaptive and disrupted forms of caregiving. However, assessing disrupted caregiving in community and family service settings is an extremely challenging task, as most validated research observational tools are exceedingly time consuming for front-line service providers to learn and administer. Together with academic and community-based partners, the current project aims to overcome this resource-limitation by validating and disseminating a brief form based on a widely used, psychometrically sound observational tool, the Atypical Maternal Behaviour Instrument for Assessment and Classification (AMBIANCE), which is anchored in a rigorous developmental tradition of attachment research. The partners involved in the current application share in common a need for a more versatile and manageable assessment measure of disrupted parenting to pursue our shared research and community service goals.

The proposed project will bridge the research-to-practice gap by generating a brief version of an existing observational measure of disrupted caregiving - i.e., the AMBIANCE-brief. The objectives of the current proposal, which will be carried out with academic and community agency partners, are to: (1) generate the AMBIANCE-brief, which can be scored in less than 5 minutes, and which is deemed to be of practical use by our community agency partners; (2a) assess the concurrent validity of the AMBIANCE and AMBIANCE-brief; (2b) determine the predictive validity of the AMBIANCE-brief, in regards to its ability to predict markers of negative child outcomes; (3) test the acceptability and feasibility of the tool through use in the partnering agencies; and (4) build and develop computer software tools for widespread training and dissemination. Thus, we will establish evidence and "proof of concept" regarding the efficacy of the instrument and develop an informed approach to dissemination. Ultimately, the AMBIANCE-brief will help close the existing research-to-practice gap by serving as a tool that can be used to signal a need for a more comprehensive assessment of parenting (e.g., parenting capacity assessment), to identify areas of concern for intervention planning, and be used within the context of intervention itself.

The time, effort, and knowledge needed to conduct the proposed project transcend the capacity of any one scholar, institution, or community agency. To be successful, the project requires a three-year multi-phase collaborative approach, in which the research tool informs practice, and practice validates and refines the research tool and methods for wide dissemination. Due to the multiple steps required to carry out this project, we anticipate that a three-year timeline is feasible and optimal, allowing us time to gather sufficient partner input, collect and analyze breadth of data, and develop high quality training tools. The collaborative nature of this project from the outset is a unique feature of this partnership that will ensure its success. This interdisciplinary, multi-site, and inter-agency collaboration will lay the groundwork for a robust partnership that can effectively facilitate the integration of research and practice to identify families at risk of problematic outcomes. Ultimately, this partnership will lead to the gradual implementation of a sustainable and transformative knowledge dissemination platform for numerous community agencies across Canada.