

Dr. Elizabeth Skowron, research scientist at Prevention Science Institute, associate professor of counseling psychology at the University of Oregon College of Education, and director of the Graduate Specialization in Prevention Science program, has been awarded a five-year, \$3.1 million grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to investigate the mechanisms of change underlying a parenting intervention for families struggling with child maltreatment (CM).

Dr. Skowron's recent work has shown that abusive parents often experience high levels of physiological stress when they attempt more positive methods of parenting, which leads them to resort to negative, aversive strategies. In their new grant-funded study, which is an extension of this research, Skowron and co-investigator Dr. Phil Fisher will investigate the neurobiological bases of change that occur as parents work to strengthen their parenting skills and change parent-child interaction patterns that lead to abuse.

Nationwide, only a handful of parenting interventions have been shown to be effective for reducing CM recidivism (i.e., new incidences of CM) among parents involved with Child Protective Services (CPS). One such program, called Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), will be the focal point of the new study. PCIT is an evidence-based parenting program that helps empower CPS-involved parents to make changes that lead to more nurturing, positive, and secure relationships with their children. As such, it improves the parenting experience and effectively interrupts the intergenerational transmission of CM.

In this parenting program, parents wear a tiny earpiece while they play with their children in a clinical setting. From the other side of a one-way mirror a therapist "coaches" the parent via a headset, providing positive feedback, support, and guidance while the parent plays with his or her child. Skowron theorizes that over time this real-time support for improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and changing negative interaction patterns may interrupt the negative physiological effects revealed in her earlier studies. Previous outcome research on PCIT has shown that it improves children's behavior and that parents report feeling more confident and less distress at program completion. Parent satisfaction with the program is high. Skowron believes that new insights gained from this work will help better tailor approaches to families on the basis of their individual concerns and needs and deliver resources more efficiently and effectively to more families.

"We have found that the vast majority of parents struggling with CM care deeply about their children and want things to improve," Skowron said. "But they feel at a loss for what to do and how to change. Many themselves have often been exposed to CM as children and are trying to cope with countless other stressors."

Skowron's team has already begun preparing for the study and will start providing the parenting program free to eligible families in early 2016.