

Family Support and . . . Parenting Education

The Need

Parents from all walks of life—no matter what their socioeconomic position or culture—frequently seek information and advice to help them understand and respond to their children.

Historically, parents have had such knowledge and skills passed down to them by their own families. In many cultures and communities, that pattern still exists, but in many others, the wisdom of the preceding generation is either not available or not adequate.

As families have become smaller and separated by distance, the ease of passing on the accumulated child rearing wisdom has decreased. In addition, some parents want and need ways of rearing their children that are different from those used by their own parents. They may disagree with some of their parents' practices, or they may feel that circumstances have changed and there is little relevant advice from the past that would apply to their current situation. Many parents believe they are preparing their children for a world that may be vastly different from today's, and the old methods may not prepare their children for what they will have to face as adults (Heath, 1999).

Parents are also bombarded with advice beyond what comes to them from their families (Simpson, 1997). There are at least 1,500 books on parenting in print. Half of talk shows devote significant time to parent-child relations. Internet access provides even more information. The messages can be conflicting, inconsistent, and confusing: "Pick up the crying

baby." "Don't pick up the crying baby." "Spank." "Don't spank." The opinions available on almost every aspect of child rearing are divided.

For all of these reasons, parents—who in this fact sheet are defined as anyone who has made a commitment to care for a child from now until the child reaches adulthood—are often looking for information, skills, and support to help them better guide their children.

The Role of Parenting Education

Through parenting education, family support programs meet parents' need for information and skill-building opportunities (Ahsan & Cramer, 1999). Such opportunities can help parents better guide their children and assist them in sorting and choosing from the array of information they encounter.

In 1996, approximately 50,000 programs nationwide offered parenting education (Carter, 1996). Programs vary tremendously in what they offer. Some emphasize communication skills; others focus on parents as teachers. Some programs train parents for childbirth; others are for parents with adolescents. Programs may be located in homes, churches, social centers, or schools. Some programs are didactic; illustrating what parents should do based on the program's philosophy and/or established research findings. Other programs help parents articulate their values and integrate them into their parenting. Some programs follow detailed curricula; others have no written content. Ideally, the

Tips for Family Support Programs

- Provide parenting education based on families' needs. What questions do parents have? What strengths, needs, interests, and preferences do you observe in families? What current sources of information are there for parents?
- Choose material that reflects an awareness of cultural traditions and mores in the community. Use the questions provided in this fact sheet to determine which materials, styles, and curricula parents will prefer.
- Obtain staff training. Some staff should be knowledgeable about human development, the needs of children and of parents, and current research findings. Someone should know the current issues in parenting education and the kinds of programs, curricula, books, and videos that are available.
- Set up an information center for parents. Publications and audio-visual materials should be placed in an area with comfortable chairs and beverages.
- Provide an information packet that parents can take home. It could include short articles, tips, and suggestions for further reading (possibly a list of local library holdings) on issues important to parents.
- Offer parent education/support groups. Information and support can be provided in many different forms to meet the interests and needs of parents.
- Link with other agencies and organizations. Working with libraries, cooperative extensions, schools, and childcare programs can expand the resources available to parents in your program, and can enable you to reach more families. The Internet can be another source of information.
- Be aware of other parenting programs in the community. Some programs are available in almost every community. Staff should know what programs are available and what their objectives are, and they should share this information with parents.
- Know your boundaries and make referrals. Some families have issues that require specialized help, such as a child who is developmentally delayed or who has a serious illness. Work with local programs in establishing mutual referral guidelines.



parenting education component of family support programs should help parents find the information and skills they want (Powell, 1986).

The Challenge

The continuing challenge for family support staff and parents is to find or create parenting education programs that meet the needs of parents as their children grow and develop. Parenting education must provide the information and build the skills desired and needed by parents but also build a solid knowledge base of human development and an understanding of the parenting role. It must be sensitive to the traditions, learning styles, and mores of the family, culture, and community while providing parents with the knowledge and skills to teach their children what they will need to live in American society (Heath, 1998).

Family support staff and parents may choose one or more of the many established curricula available, create their own, or meld a variety of sources. In most cases, even a well-researched and tested curriculum must be adapted by the family support staff to respond to community needs and strengths. There are several basic steps to initiating or

revising the parenting education component of a family support program: (1) explore the needs and preferences of parents, (2) locate existing curricula for evaluation, and (3) decide which curriculum to use or create an original curriculum.

I. Explore the Needs and Preferences of Parents

Staff and parents, separately and together, can use the following questions to gather the needed information. Some parents will respond positively to the question-and-answer format, finding it empowering. Others respond better if the ideas are presented as non-interrogative discussion topics. The input can be gathered in writing or during focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Some of the questions are easily answered; others require more reflection and discussion.

1. What basic information are parents looking for?

Do they want to know how to prepare their young children for school? Or do they need information on living with and guiding adolescents, communicating with their children, or methods of discipline?

2. How soon do parents want the program?

Parents with very young children may have time over several years to prepare their children for school. In contrast, parents may want to respond immediately to an increase in local drug dealing by learning how to protect their children.

3. How much can parents or the family support program afford to spend on the curriculum?

The costs of starting parenting education vary. Some curricula are free or require a nominal materials fee; some cost several hundred dollars. In addition, many curricula require trained leadership, and some curricula distributors charge for leadership training.

4. How much time can parents commit to parenting education?

Even parents who are very interested and committed may not have much time for parenting education. Parents working outside of the home often are reluctant to extend their separation from their families. Time to read may also be limited.

The following questions are more difficult to answer. Lengthy discussions on these subjects may be necessary

before the program can move ahead.

5. What are parents' values and long-term goals for their children?

What kind of adults do the parents want their children to grow into? What attributes will children need to live in the world of tomorrow? For example, one goal parents may have is for their children to grow into healthy adults. In this case, the parenting education program must reinforce behavior that teaches children to be aware of what their bodies are telling them. The curriculum on infant feeding should encourage parents to respond to indications that the baby is full. The curriculum on toilet training methods should suggest that parents focus on the toddler's sense of when he or she needs to go to the toilet. A curriculum about using drugs or driving cars should guide parents to teach older children and youth appropriate decision-making skills.

6. What do parents believe their children need to grow and develop well?

This question may be the most difficult to explore, because while parents' beliefs affect all aspects of parenting (Sigel, 1985, 1992), they can be difficult to identify and articulate. Parents reject programs that conflict with their beliefs, which can be deeply embedded in their philosophy or culture. Efforts should be made to select a curriculum that is consistent with families' belief systems and to help families adapt to achieve the results they want. For example, parents may use physical punishment because they believe their children need discipline in order to succeed. These parents will accept other methods only if they see that they work more effectively to instill discipline or that there are reasons for using other methods. Many parents look for other means of discipline when they realize



Photo © 1999 Stephen Shames

Some programs incorporate children's activities into parenting education.

they won't be able to spank a 16-year-old who towers over them.

7. What methods of presentation will be most effective and comfortable for parents?

Some common methods include lectures, group discussions, role playing, audio-visual presentations, and home visiting (see sidebar). Experiential learning and group discussion are preferable to lectures (Thomas, 1998). However, in some cultures, personal issues simply are not discussed outside the family. In response, some programs start with home visiting and then progress toward group discussions, and they use lectures instead of group sharing (Gonzales-Mena, 1997). Personal preferences vary, too. Some parents are very uncomfortable with role-playing exercises; others find them fun and effective.

Parenting education tends to rely on oral modes of learning, but learning styles vary from person to person. Videotapes and computers are making visual learning a more viable option. Using charts and listing observations and comments are other ways of supporting visual learners.

In addition to the above, also consider the following factors:

- Location (home, religious or educational setting, family resource center, etc.)
- Number of people participating (from one-on-one to groups of hundreds)
- Parents and children together versus parents meeting in a separate group

8. What kind of leader will be most effective?

There are many choices. The leader could be a formally trained person who knows about all aspects of child development and child rearing, or the leader could be a parent from the group or

neighborhood who is experienced and regarded as wise—and who is supported with needed training from the program. Leaders could be chosen because of their sensitivity to individuals' feelings or their skill in group dynamics. The decision will be made partly on the basis of human and financial resources available. However, as much as possible, the program should choose the kind of leader who will be most effective for the specific group (Harmon & Brim, 1980).

II. Locate Existing Curricula for Consideration

Innumerable curricula and teaching materials are available in many different forms. Locating them will take some creative research, since a comprehensive list is not currently available. The list of resources in this fact sheet includes reference guides as well as Web sites that can guide the search. Some organizations, such as the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN), National Network for Family Resiliency (NNFR), the Family Resource Coalition of America (FRCA), and the National Parent Information Network

Home Visiting

Many family support programs use home visiting as a method of conducting parenting education. Sometimes, circumstances point toward home visiting as the best way to reach parents. Perhaps a family has recently immigrated from another country and is unsure how to engage with the community, or a new mother wants guidance but lives in a remote area without reliable access to transportation.

In many cases, home visiting is a complement to on-site services and programs, allowing parents to engage in parenting education "on their own turf" and letting staff get to know the family's strengths and challenges in the home context. Family support programs can use home visiting to:

- Share child development information
- Teach parenting and parental coping skills
- Act as a lending library of toys and books
- Build a relationship with and provide support for families during critical early childhood years

Most home visiting programs seek to eventually bring participants together in support groups, group activities, or site-based activities. Effective home visiting programs not only provide parenting information and support to isolated families, but reduce the isolation of families by encouraging the development of social networks and peer support opportunities.

(NPIN), have Web sites that allow parent educators to request information about available resources and exchange ideas about available curricula.

III. Decide on a Curriculum

The following questions help identify the strengths of any existing or new curriculum. The answers to these questions should be compared to parents' answers during phase I, above, to make sure their values, cultures, and styles match those of the curriculum that is chosen.

1. What is the basic objective of the curriculum?

For example, is its aim to improve communication, build self-esteem, or help parents maintain a warm, loving relationship with their children through their children's adolescence?

2. How easy is it to obtain the program?

Is it in written form and available from a publisher?

3. What are the costs? Is it affordable?

4. How long does it take for parents to complete the program?

Time commitments can vary from one hour in total to a 14-week series of twice-weekly sessions.

5. What are the program's values and goals for children and parents?

The promotional literature for the curriculum usually describes the basic outcomes expected of children whose parents have completed the program.

6. What are the curriculum author's basic beliefs and/or assumptions about what children need to grow and develop?

Curricula seldom identify their underlying beliefs and assumptions explicitly. It is important that staff and parents identify them by critically examining specific parenting advice that the curriculum gives.

For example, the curriculum may advise that the parent not pick up a crying infant immediately. What assumptions and beliefs underlie that advice? The authors may believe that this response leads the child to develop independence, or they

may believe that crying is good for the child's health. Let's say the curriculum advises parents to immediately pick up the crying infant. Perhaps the author believes that this leads the child to develop a sense of security and to be nurtured.

Are these beliefs in line with those of parents and staff of the program? If there is significant conflict, the program may choose to not use all or part of the curriculum—or to use the areas of conflict as topics of discussion during parenting education activities.

7. What methods does the program use to present its content?

Does the curriculum use lectures, group discussions, videos, role-play, charts, etc.? Are charts included? What materials must be purchased, and what can the program staff develop?

8. What kind of leadership is recommended?

Requirements for leadership vary widely. If a particular curriculum calls for highly trained leaders, but the participants feel much more comfortable with a peer, creative solutions can be found, such as training the peer leader or providing him or her with a knowledgeable support system.

Family support programs provide a variety of resources to inform parents about child development, the parent-child relationship, and parenting issues. For family support staff, the challenge is to work with parents to find effective resources for a specific setting. This goal can be met by matching the interests and needs of the parents to be served with the strengths and competencies emphasized in the parenting education program.

References

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Curricula (Presented at the Parenthood Conference: Parenthood in America, Madison, Wis., April 19-21. Available on-line at parenthood.library.wisc.edu).

Family Support Is

- **A set of beliefs, and the approach that these beliefs engender:** strengthening and empowering families and communities so that they can foster the optimal development of children, youth, and adult family members. Family support envisions a society in which all of us—families, communities, government, human service institutions, businesses—work together to provide healthy, safe environments for children and families to live and work in.
- **A type of grassroots, community-based program** that provides resources for families. Building on shared beliefs, these programs embody the family support approach in their relationships with participating families and communities. These programs have been proliferating in neighborhoods across the country since the early 1970s, and continue to refine their practices and inform the field about quality in family support services.
- **A shift in how agencies and organizations do their work** and interact with families and communities. Family support beliefs guide and shape health, education, and human service systems and organizations to be more preventive, community-based, culturally competent, flexible, family-focused, strength-based and comprehensive.

Principles of Family Support Practice*

- Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
- Staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth, and children.
- Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
- Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
- Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
- Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
- Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
- Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
- Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.
- Family Resource Coalition of America (1996) *Guidelines for Family Support Practice* (Chicago, IL).

Publications

Choosing Parenting Curricula Based on the Interests, Needs, and Preferences of the Parents Who Will Use Them

By H. Heath
1999

Provides a theoretical basis for the information and skills parents need.

Available on-line at:
parenthood.library.wisc.edu

Guidelines for Family Support Practice

1996, 133 pp.

Based on several years of gathering quality family support practices from programs nationwide, this guide clearly states the principles of family support practice and the role of parenting education within the family support movement.

Available from:
Family Resource Coalition
of America
312/338-0900
www.frca.org

Helping Parents in Groups: A Leader's Handbook

By L. Braun, J. Coplon,
& P. Sonnenschein
1984, 276 pp.

A basic manual for leaders of parenting groups.

Available from:
Resource Communications, Inc.

1616 Soldiers Field Road
Boston, MA 02135

Home Visiting: Recent Program Evaluations (in The Future of Children, Vol. 9, No. 1)

By R. Behrman
1999

Review of various home visiting programs that includes a summary of content covered and assessments conducted, as well as information about where to obtain more information. Distributed at no charge.

Available from:
The David and Lucille Packard
Foundation
300 Second Street, Ste. 22
Los Altos, CA 94022

How Are We Doing? A Program Self-Assessment Toolkit for the Family Support Field

By N. Ahsan & L. Cramer
1999, 211 pp.

Provides benchmarks for family support programs, including parenting education issues such as choosing a leader, content and format, and other issues.

Available from:
Family Resource Coalition
of America
312/338-0900
www.frca.org

Multicultural Issues in Child Care

By J. Gonzales-Mena
1997, 117 pp.

Now in its second edition, this book provides a clear overview of cultural issues that are very relevant for the parent educator.

Available from:
Mayfield Publishing Co.
650/694-2815

Multicultural Parenting Educational Guide: Understanding Cultural Parenting Values, Traditions and Practices

Edited by S. Bavolek
1997, 198 pp.

In this resource for parent educators, representatives from different cultures describe their values, traditions, and practices.

Available from:
Family Development
Resources Inc.
435/649-5822

What Curricular Perspectives Can Tell Us About Parenting Education Curricula

By R. Thomas & O. Footrakoon
1998

Paper presented at the Parenthood Conference: Parenthood in America, Madison, Wis.: April 19-21.

Available on-line at:
parenthood.library.wisc.edu

Who Me, Lead a Group?

By J. Clarke
1998, 122 pp.

Though not written specifically for parenting educators, the book covers simply and succinctly the basic issues of leading a group.

Available from:
Parenting Press
206/364-2900

Working with Fathers: Methods and Perspectives

By The Minnesota Fathering Alliance
1992, 200 pp.

Deals with many of the issues raised in this fact sheet, from a father's perspective. Published by Nu Ink Unlimited. Out of print.

Available through:
Your public library or inter-library loan.

Working with Parents: A Guide to Successful Parent Groups

By D. Curran
1989, 145 pp.

Covers a wide range of issues that arise when working with parents.

Available from:
American Guidance Service
612/786-4343

ParentLink Resources

- Guide for Choosing Parenting Curricula**
- Guide for Choosing Grandparenting Curricula**
- Guide for Choosing African American Parenting Curricula**
- Guide for Choosing Hispanic/Latino American Parenting Curricula**
- Guide for Choosing Native American Parenting Curricula**

1990-1994, 72 pp. each

The above publications provide reviews of parenting education curricula written by a multidisciplinary committee of professionals. Included are: easy-to-read quick-reference pages and narratives covering hundreds of curricula, reviewer's notes, a special section on "How to Select Parent Education Programs," and parenting education information for working with culturally specific audiences.

ParentLink Resource Library

1998, 132 pp.

Lists library resources for parents and parent educators. Includes a couple of sentences describing the entry.

ParentLink resources are available from:

ParentLink
573/882-3796
outreach.missouri.edu/parentlink



Many programs use small group activities as part of parenting education.

Organizations with Internet Sites

Extension Programs

www.cyfernet.org

Cooperative Extension Service is located in most counties across the nation and provides services such as parenting groups and childcare referral networks.

Family Resource Coalition of America (FRCA)

www.frca.org

Provides a location for discussion of parenting issues including curricula and family center resources.

National Parenting Education Network (NPEN)

npn.crc.uiuc.edu

This new organization is working to advance the field of parenting education by facilitating new initiatives in collaboration with other organizations such as a network of parenting educators and the NPEN-L listserv.

National Network for Family Resiliency (NNFR)

www.nnfr.org

Offers a variety of resources of interest to parents and parenting educators, including: the Pareduc Listserv, Evaluation of Parenting Education Programs, and the Children's Trust Fund and Partners with Parents databases, both of which have lists of available curricula.

National Parent Information Network (NPIN)

www.npin.org

Sponsored by the ERIC Clearinghouse System, and providing the world's largest source of education information, NPIN supports a variety of educational services to parents and educators and fosters the exchange of parenting materials.

This fact sheet was written by members of the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN): Karen Debord, Ph.D., Harriet Heath, Ph.D., Dana McDermott, Ph.D., and Randi Wolfe, Ph.D., with input from the NPEN management team. For further information, contact Harriet Heath, 610/649-7037, Harriet_Heath@hotmail.com.

The mission of the National Parenting Education Network is to advance the field of parenting education. It aims to do so by: encouraging and supporting networking among practitioners, resources, and organizations

involved in parenting education; consolidating and expanding the knowledge base about parenting and parenting education; creating opportunities for professional growth; and providing national leadership in the field.

Family Resource Coalition of America

is an alliance of people and organizations convinced that in order to do the best we can by our children, we need to support and strengthen families and communities. Since 1981, FRCA has been helping the family support movement grow by gathering knowledge, providing consulting services, advocating

for public policy, building constituency and networks, and producing publications and materials. FRCA can be reached at 20 N. Wacker Drive, Suite 1100, Chicago, IL 60606, 312/338-0900, 312/338-1522 (fax), frca@frca.org, www.frca.org.

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