



Indira Johnson

## Sharing the Wisdom on Parenting

Turning Information Overload Into a Curriculum That Works

**By Karen Debord, Ph.D.; Harriet Heath, Ph.D.; Dana McDermott, Ph.D.; and Randi Wolfe, Ph.D.**

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 rear-

ing 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.

Parents are also bombarded with advice beyond what comes to them from their families. 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 we define 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.

### What Is Parenting Education?

Through parenting education, family support programs meet parents' need for information and skill-building opportunities. 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. 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 parenting education component of family support programs should help parents find the information and skills they want.

### How to Face the Challenges

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



### Tips for Family Support Providers

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 article 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 extension, 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.

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.

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 fam-

ily 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, 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 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, and presenting audio-visual materials. Experiential learning and group discussion are preferable to lectures. 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. 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.

## 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 beginning on page 43 includes reference guides as well as Web sites that can guide the search. Some organizations, such as the National Parenting Education Network, the National Network for Family Resiliency, the Family Resource Coalition of America, and the National Parent Information Network have Web sites that allow parent educators to request information about available resources and exchange ideas about available curricula.

## III. Decide Which Curriculum to Use

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. ■



**Karen Debord** researches parenting education materials and programs at the North Carolina Cooperative Extension.



**Harriet Heath**, NPEN chair and a licensed developmental and certified school psychologist, founded and directs Bryn Mawr's Parent Center.



**Dana McDermott** is a developmental psychologist and certified family life educator at the Latin School of Chicago.



**Randi Wolfe** is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Northern Illinois University and creator of "Listening to Children."

The authors are members of the National Parenting Education Network, which works to advance the field of parenting. For further information, contact Harriet Heath, 610/649-7037, Harriet\_Heath@hotmail.com.

## Sources

Ahsan, N. & L. Cramer (1999) *How Are We Doing? A Program Self-Assessment Toolkit for the Family Support Field* (Chicago, Ill.: Family Resource Coalition of America).

Carter, N. (1996) *See How We Grow: A Report on the Status of Parenting Education in the U.S.* (Philadelphia, Penn.: The Pew Charitable Trusts).

Gonzales-Mena, J. (1997) *Multicultural Issues in Child Care*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing).

Harmon, D. & O. Brim (1980) *Learning to Be Parents: Principles, Programs, and Methods* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications).

Heath, H. (1998) Choosing Parenting Curricula Based on the Interests, Needs and Preferences of the Parents Who Will Use it (Presented at the Parenthood Conference: Parenthood in America, Madison, Wis. April 19-21. Available online at [parenthood.library.wisc.edu](http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu)).

Powell, D. (1986) "Matching parents and programs," in J. Parsons, T. Bowman, J. Comeau, R. Pitzer, & G. Schmitt (eds.) *Parent Education: State of the Art* (White Bear Lake, Minn.: Minn. Curriculum Services Center, Minnesota Council on Family Relations, and Minnesota Home Economics Association) 1-11.

Sigel, I., A. McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & J. Goodnow (eds.) (1992) *Parental Belief Systems: The Psychological Consequences for Children*, 2nd ed. (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).

Simpson, R. (1997) *The Role of the Mass Media in Parenting Education* (Boston: Center for Health Communication).

Thomas, R. & O. Footrakoon (1998) What Curricular Perspectives Can Tell Us about Parent Education Curricula (Presented at the Parenthood Conference: Parenthood in America, Madison, Wis. April 19-21. Available online at [parenthood.library.wisc.edu](http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu)).