

Best Practices for Parent Education Programs Seeking to Prevent Child Abuse

Lisa C. Shannon, Ph.D.

Extension Associate: Children, Youth, and Families

North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service

The Nature of the Problem

Child abuse continues to be a major problem in the United States. In 2000, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System found that of the three million suspected child maltreatment cases reported to Child Protective Service agencies across the nation, about 879,000 children were victims of child maltreatment. Approximately 63% of these children were victims of neglect, 19% were abused physically, 10% were abused sexually, and 8% were psychologically abused. In most of these cases, the children's parents were the abusers.

Children who are abused suffer from a variety of negative outcomes in addition to any injuries they sustain as a direct result of the abuse. Compared to children who are not abused, these children are at greater risk for experiencing low self-esteem, a lack of self-control, higher levels of aggression and violence, academic and vocational problems, depression, alcoholism, interpersonal problems, and increased likelihood of abusing their own children. Many of these problems continue into adulthood. Communities also experience many hardships caused by child abuse, as they have to shoulder financial, social, and other burdens associated with child maltreatment, such as investigating child abuse reports,

treating child abuse victims and abusers, placing abused children in appropriate care, and taking legal action against the abuser.

Risk Factors for Child Abuse

There are many factors that increase the likelihood that parents will abuse their children including the following:

- Factors associated with poverty, such as unemployment, low level of education, and earning an annual income of less than \$15,000
- Being a teen parent
- Having many closely spaced children
- Experiencing high levels of conflict in one's family
- Holding unrealistic expectations about parenting and about what children are capable of doing
- Having a negative attitude towards one's children
- Using authoritarian parenting styles, with lots of control but little warmth
- Using physical punishment
- Having a history of abuse (either as a victim or perpetrator of abuse)
- Experiencing low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, or other mental health problems
- Having a substance abuse problem
- A lack of social support from friends, family, and other networks

- Experiencing high levels of stress

How can Parent Education Programs Reduce the Risk?

There are many techniques parent education programs can use to reduce the likelihood that a parent will abuse his or her children.

Increase parents' knowledge about children and parenting

Many parents who abuse their children do not know very much about how children typically act, think, and grow. Therefore, it is often useful for parent education programs to teach parents about child development. Parents who have a good understanding of what behaviors are typical for children at different ages and stages are more likely to hold appropriate expectations for their children than are parents with little knowledge about children. When teaching parents about child development, it is sometimes helpful to parents if parent educators provide them with real life examples of how children think, act, and behave. For example, it is often beneficial to take an "ages and stages" approach and give parents concrete examples of typical and appropriate behaviors of newborns, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children.

Give parents a chance to practice using what they have learned

When parents have learned how children act, think, and grow at different ages, it is useful for parent educators to give them a chance to practice thinking about how their children might behave in everyday situations. To accomplish this goal, parent educators can describe or

act out several scenarios that parents might encounter with their children and ask parents to think about how their children might act. By giving parents the opportunity to practice imagining how their children might react to real life situations, parent educators can help parents anticipate their children's behaviors so they can think of appropriate ways to respond. It is generally advantageous for parent educators to give parents many opportunities to practice thinking about their children's capabilities and what they may and may not expect their children to be able to do.

Teach parents how to manage their children without abusing them

Once parents have achieved an understanding of child development and appropriate expectations, it becomes important for parent educators to teach important skills, such as child management techniques, to at-risk parents to help them in their parenting. Many parents who abuse their children resort to abuse as discipline because they do not know how to deal with their children when they misbehave. To help parents learn and practice alternative child management techniques and other parenting skills, it is often helpful for parents to role-play with each other. This exercise allows parents to practice using their skills, and it has the added benefit of giving them the opportunity to put themselves in their children's shoes to see things from their children's perspective.

Teach parents how to manage stress

Because stress is one of the biggest risk factors for child abuse, it is critical for parent education programs to teach parents about the importance of

managing stress in their daily lives. It is also useful for parent educators to help parents identify what makes them stressed and find ways to help them manage that stress. Some techniques parent educators can suggest include: participating in relaxing activities, seeking out social supports, getting enough exercise and rest, and working to change one's attitude toward stress producing situations. In addition to stress reduction techniques, is important for parent educators to teach at-risk parents how to seek out other resources, such as childcare supports or social services, which can help lessen some of the causes of their stress. Helping parents reduce their stress will likely improve their quality of life, which can help them be better parents to their children.

Help parents improve their relationships with others

Parents who have little social support and problems in their relationships with others are often at a higher risk for abusing their children. Therefore, it is often beneficial for parents and their children if parent educators help parents learn and practice important communication skills, such as how to listen without interrupting, how to use "I-messages" rather than "you-messages," and other techniques. When parents improve their communication skills, they will be better able to reduce family conflict and to improve their relationships with their families and with other people. Parent educators can help parents learn how to seek out supportive social networks, through family, friends, parent education classes, community organizations, and other agencies. When parents have close relationships with other people,

they will often experience a feeling of connectedness to others, reduced stress and higher levels of life satisfaction, all of which decrease the likelihood that they will abuse their children.

Summary of key teaching goals for parent educators

1. Teach parents how children think, act, and grow at different ages and stages of their lives.
2. Help parents develop realistic expectations for their children.
3. Give parents the opportunity to practice thinking about how their children develop, and give them the opportunity to practice setting appropriate expectations and goals for their children.
4. Teach parents appropriate non-abusive child management techniques and other parenting skills.
5. Educate parents about the importance of managing stress. Help them find stress-reducing techniques that will work for them.
6. Teach parents about the value of social support. Help them develop the skills they need to improve their relationships.
7. Encourage parents to use the parent education program as a source of social support.
8. Teach parents how to access additional supportive systems they might need outside of the program.

Best Practices for Parent Education Programs Targeting Child Abuse

There have been many efforts to design and implement parent education

programs to target and reduce child abuse. While some of these programs have demonstrated success at reducing the risk for child abuse, other programs have not accomplished this goal. What makes a parent education program successful? Research shows that it is often advantageous to implement the following best practices to increase the odds that a parent education program targeting child abuse will be successful.

It is worthwhile for parent education programs to target as many risk factors as possible

Because child abuse generally results from several risk factors, rather than one specific thing, it is important for parent education programs to target as many risk factors as possible. In particular, parent education programs will often be more successful if they strive to educate parents on child development, child management, the importance of and techniques in stress management, how to communicate effectively and how to seek out social supports and improve relationships. It is also beneficial for parents and their children when parent education programs provide social support to parents to reduce stress and improve mental health. If parents have other problems, such as unemployment or substance abuse, programs can offer supportive services targeting these specific problems. The more risk factors a program reduces, the greater the likelihood that parents will not begin or continue to abuse their children.

It is important for programs to target knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations

As mentioned previously, parent education programs should seek to improve parents' knowledge, but it is

also important to change parents' attitudes, skills, and aspirations, because parents need more than knowledge to change their behaviors. To illustrate the importance of targeting knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspirations, consider a parenting program that is trying to teach positive child management techniques to at-risk parents. To increase the likelihood that parents' child management behaviors will change, parents need not only the *knowledge* that alternative child management techniques exist, but they also need to have a positive *attitude* towards the alternative methods. Furthermore, parents need to have the *skills* needed to implement alternative child management techniques, and they need to *aspire* to change their behaviors. A failure at any one of these levels will greatly reduce the chance that parents will actually change their parenting behaviors in the desired ways, but success at all levels will greatly improve the likelihood that parents will change their behaviors in a positive manner.

Programs need to work with parents often and over a long period of time

While there are currently no set standards for appropriate program duration and intensity for parent education programs targeting child abuse, it is clear that longer, more intensive programs are generally more successful than shorter-term, less intense programs. In particular, research suggests that parents seem to benefit most from programs that provide some type of contact (e.g., classes, home visits, phone calls) at least four times per week and those that last for at least 6-8 months. It is important to note, however, that if a program has to

choose between intensity and duration, research has shown that intensity appears to have a stronger impact on parent outcomes than program duration.

Programs need effective leaders and parent educators

Parent education programs will be more effective if they have strong, energetic leaders who are committed to the program's success. If the program is a group program, it is important for the parent educators to have solid group facilitation skills. Strong leaders can benefit programs in several ways, such as by creating positive attitudes among program staff, gaining clients' trust and respect, building nurturing relationships with parents involved in the program, and actively pursuing funding opportunities for the program. In addition, a parent education program will increase its chance of successfully changing parents' behaviors if it has parent educators who appear credible to the parents it serves. What makes a parent educator appear credible to an at-risk parent? Parent educators generally appear credible to and are well-received by program participants when they are similar in terms of demographics to the clients they serve and when they are respectful of their program participants.

It is useful for programs to work with other agencies as appropriate

Because parents who are at-risk for abusing their children are often dealing with a variety of issues and stressors (such as substance abuse, poverty, or joblessness), it is often useful for parent education programs to work with other community agencies, including the Department of Social Services, the Department of Health, and other

agencies, to make sure all of their clients' needs are met. Parents who receive as many supports as possible, both within the program and in addition to the program, are generally less likely to begin or continue abusing their children.

Programs can seek to tailor their services to meet their clients' individual needs

Parents have a variety of needs and will respond differently to the various types of program services. Therefore, it is important for parent education programs to determine which type of program approach will most effectively serve parents who are at-risk for abusing their children. For example, if a parent enrolled in a program has special needs concerning literacy or educational levels, the program could make accommodations to help that parent get as much out of the program as possible. If a parent educator needs to alter a standard curriculum, the modified curriculum needs to be appropriate for the parents in the program, and modifications should be reported.

Programs need to be well-planned

Parent education programs should not be developed and carried out haphazardly. Instead, it is important for the program's mission, goals and objectives to be made explicit to program staff and funders. To ensure that the program runs effectively, parent education programs need qualified and well-trained staff who can handle any problems or special issues that might arise. In addition to being well planned in their development and administration, parent education programs need to have solid evaluation plans that will go beyond measuring clients' satisfaction

and that directly fit with program goals and objectives. It is important to share evaluation results with program staff and administration to suggest program changes and improvements that will serve to achieve the program's goals.

Conclusion

Child abuse is a serious problem in our nation, and there is a real need for effective programs to prevent child abuse from beginning or from continuing once it has already begun. Parent education programs have shown some promise in reducing the risk for child abuse. By following the guidelines outlined in this paper, parent education programs will likely be able to help parents change their behaviors in positive ways, which should improve the quality of life for parents and their children.

Sources

Sources for the Nature of the Problem:

- English, D. (1998). The extent and consequences of child maltreatment. The Future of Children, 8 (1), 39 – 53.
- Kohko, D. J. (1992). Characteristics of child victims of physical violence. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 7 (2), 244-276.
- Malinosky-Rummel, R., & Hanen, D. J. (1993). Long-term consequences of childhood physical abuse. Psychological Bulletin, 114 (1), 68-79.
- The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. (2002). National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) Summary of Key Findings from Calendar Year 2000. Report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families.
- Sedlak, A. J., & Broadhurst, D. D. (1996). Third national incidence study of

child abuse and neglect: Final report. Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Sources for risk factors:

- Crouch, J. L., & Milner, J. S. (1993). Effects of child neglect on children. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 20 (1), 49 – 65.
- English, D. (1998). The extent and consequences of child maltreatment. The Future of Children, 8 (1), 39 – 53.
- McKay, M. M. (1994). The link between domestic violence and child abuse: Assessment and treatment considerations. Child Welfare, 73, 29-39.

Sources for how parent education programs can reduce the risk:

- Culbertson, J. L., & Schellenbach, C. J. (1992). Prevention of maltreatment in infants and young children. In Willis, D. J., Holden, E. W., & Rosenberg, M. (Eds.), Prevention of child maltreatment: Developmental and ecological perspectives. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Daro, D., & McCurdy, K. (1994). Preventing child abuse and neglect: Programmatic interventions. Child Welfare, 73 (5), 405 – 431.
- Olds, D. L., & Henderson, C. R. (1989). The prevention of maltreatment. In D. Cicchetti & V. Carlson (Eds.), Child maltreatment: Theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sources for best practices:

- National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse (1992). Evaluation of the William Penn Foundation Child Abuse Prevention Initiative. Chicago: NCPA.
- National Research Council (1993). Understanding child abuse and neglect.

Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- Reppucci, M. D., Britner, P. A., & Wollard, J. L. (1997). Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect through Parent Education. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.
- Whipple, E. E., & Wilson, S. R. (1996). Evaluation of a parent education program for families at risk fo child abuse. Families in Society, 77 (4), 227 – 239.
- Whipple, E. E. (1999). Reaching families with preschoolers at risk of physical child abuse: What works? Families in Society, 80 (2), 148 – 160.