

Families First White Paper

ENVISIONING, ENERGIZING, AND EMPOWERING RELATIONSHIPS – FINDINGS FROM THE PARENTING EDUCATION SUMMIT

Produced in Partnership by:
Families First Parenting Programs and Wheelock College

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Mission

Families First Parenting Programs builds positive relationships between parents and their children by educating both families and the professionals who serve them through inspiring, hands-on workshops. Our skilled workshop leaders stand beside parents and caregivers to lead them through the crucible of child rearing by transforming their experiences, doubts and fears into the knowledge and confidence they need to build positive discipline, communication, and self-esteem in families. Our training for professionals enhances their ability to better support and engage families. We help communities thrive by strengthening families first.

Crista R. Martinez, MSW, MBA
Executive Director



Introduction

The following paper reflects a synthesis of information generated from numerous sources, most significantly a Parenting Education Summit designed in a collaborative effort by Families First Parenting Programs, Cambridge, MA and Wheelock College, Boston, MA. Organized in response to perceived and explicitly expressed needs of parenting educators, parenting support and service organizations, and experts across disciplines whose goals involve strengthening family relationships, the Parenting Education Summit brought together over 100 family-support experts and parenting educators on a three-day event in May 2007.

At the conclusion of the three-day parenting education summit, findings underscored the need for an organizational structure or body that could unite the forces that already exist and that are doing valuable work across the country. There is a need to adapt content and modes of delivery to meet the needs of families, and to capitalize on the quality of relationships between parenting educators and caregivers while facilitating communication among all stakeholders – familial and fiduciary.

This paper reports the process followed by the experts who participated in the Summit to identify key issues and needs in the field, learn from each other's experiences and perspectives, and the conclusions and next steps identified at the end of the event.

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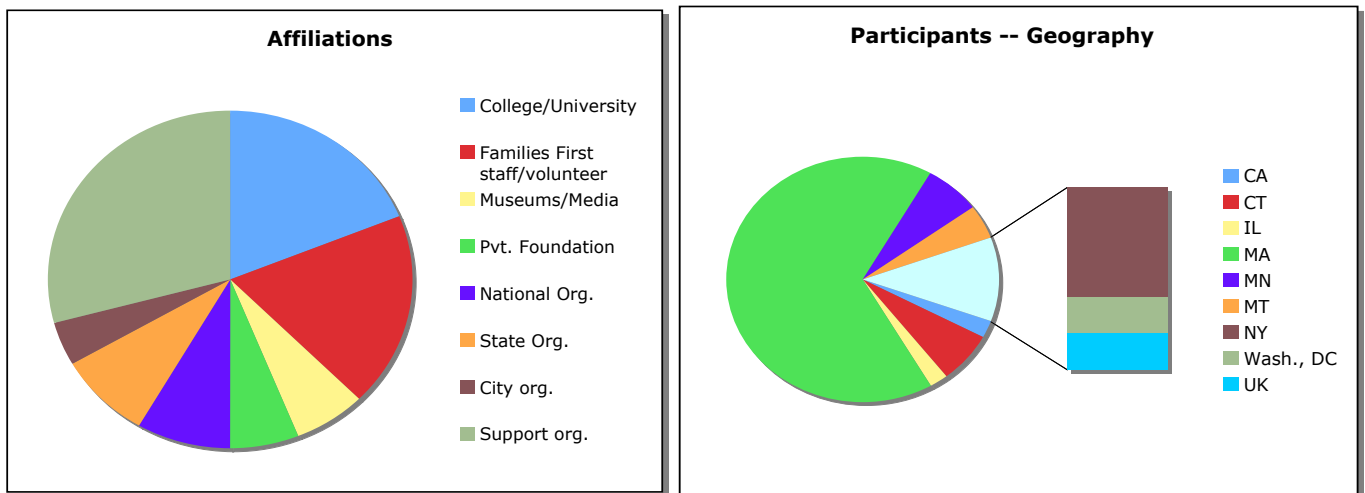


Are There Challenges in the Field of Parenting Education?

The answer to the above question is “yes,” but depending who is asked, the answer is often quite different. As a result of 1) an environmental examination, 2) persistent requests for a gathering of individuals invested in the field of parenting education broadly defined, and 3) awareness that no such gathering had occurred in over a decade, Families First initiated a collaboration with Wheelock College that had as its primary goal the development and implementation of a Parenting Education Summit to address the above question head-on. During the yearlong planning process, several goals for the Summit emerged and were identified by the members of the Families First Summit Organizing Committee. These goals included:

- Formulate strategies for increasing awareness of parenting education.
- Identify key challenges that parents and parent educators face and how to address these issues collectively.
- Agree on action steps and share findings and recommendations.

The organizing committee also identified experts from a range of disciplines and geographical locations who were invited to participate in the summit. Attendees ultimately included representatives from leading organizations in the parenting education field from across the country (e.g., Center for Work, Family, & Personal Life; Child Welfare League of America [CWLA]; Children’s Trust Fund [CTF]; National Effective Parenting Initiative [NEPI]; & National Parenting Education Network [NPEN]), academic institutions (e.g., Harvard University, Lesley University, MIT, Tufts University, Wheelock College, Bryn Mawr College & University of Minnesota), government agencies, non-profit agencies, and other organizations (e.g., media). Numerous geographical locations, including the United Kingdom, and affiliations were represented as depicted below.



During the course of the three-day Parenting Education Summit, participants were invited to co-construct a timeline of significant events in parenting education and support as a way of understanding the historical and cultural contexts of the development of the profession

(e.g., Families First Parenting Programs was founded in 1988; the National Parenting Education Network [NPEN] was established in 1996). The timeline also included research studies and publications that have had significant impact on the field. Historical factors that contributed to work being done in individual locations, as well as research supported by the Pew Charitable Trust (1994), helped bring focus to the current context in which practitioners are embedded. Participants actively contributed to the developing agenda for the Summit through exercises designed and facilitated by the Families First Summit Organizing Committee and staff.

What are the Challenges in the Field of Parenting Education?

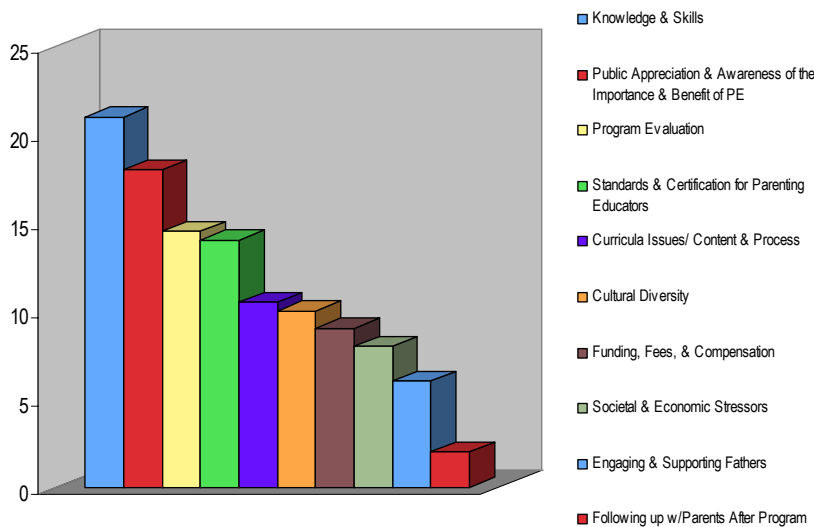
“I began my work in this field because I was concerned about my own parenting, and I think my children would very lovingly say I was dead right.”

-- Rae Simpson

Defining the field of Parenting Education was acknowledged to be almost as challenging as parenting itself. One panel presenter stated, “...we already are a field, we know who we are, we have substantial research. We are not perfect yet, but we are a field. I think it is a matter of our courage to step forward and start the mechanics...” There was also a short discussion about the difference between “parent education” and “parenting education.” At the conclusion of the first evening of the Summit, each summit participant was asked to write down what he or she considered to be the top three challenges in the field of parenting education. The Families First Summit Committee gathered the challenges articulated and organized these into several categories that were easily identified when seeing the list collectively. On the morning of the second day of the Summit, participants voted for their

top two challenges, which thereby determined the topics for subsequent breakout sessions. Table 1 depicts the results of the challenges submitted by participants (Day 1) and the subsequent vote (Day 2) that determined breakout sessions.

Challenges by Category as Ranked by Participants



The top four breakout session choices, as determined by participants' votes, were, in order of votes received:

- Knowledge & Skills necessary in the field of Parenting Education
- Public Appreciation and Awareness of the Importance and Benefits of Parenting Education
- Program Evaluation
- Standards and Certification for Parenting Educators

During a Town Meeting dialogue that occurred on the morning of Day 2, comments from participants precipitated a change in breakout sessions, so two categories that had received high votes from participants (Knowledge and Skills, and Standards and Certification) were combined to provide richer discussion about credentials while allowing Content and Process to become a distinct session. Participants elected to attend two breakout sessions each, according to their areas of interest.

Facilitators, who had been pre-selected by members of the Organizing Committee, presented guiding questions to each group of breakout session participants:

- How can we define this critical issue?
- What are the roles of parent educators and the parenting education field in finding a solution(s)?

Analysis of transcripts and notes from the breakout sessions revealed several themes that emerged, as well as areas of overlap and gaps in common understandings and interpretations. Highlights are presented below:

Content and Process

- Relationships are the most critical aspect of parenting education: relationships between family members, relationships between parent educators and caregivers, and relationships among parent support and service agencies.
- Parents need to be empowered as experts – they know their children best. Parenting educators must be aware of universal parenting needs and model the learning process for parents. Provide parents with a balance of support and education.
- Methods of delivery must be assessed in light of new technology. Acknowledging that online experiences are qualitatively different from face-to-face interactions, the media should be viewed as part of a solution rather than a problem.
- Culture and diversity are extremely complex issues. The key is to recognize that there are commonalities among cultures as well as rich diversity of experiences between individual families.

Knowledge, Skills, and Certification for Parent Educators

- Credentials are required and offered in some states and not others. For example, “In Minnesota, a parent educator license is required for employment in an Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program...The purpose of the license is to insure, through scholarly preparation, that parent educators are well-prepared professionals who are qualified to deliver educational programs for parents” (<http://www.ecfe.info>). There has been significant work in states such as Texas and North Carolina in terms of career ladders.
- Core competencies need to be identified, measured, and linked with practice. Strong work has been done in this area (e.g., National Extension Parenting Educators’ Framework [parenting educators], National Extension Parent Education Model [parenting curricula]). In addition, the Massachusetts Children’s Trust Fund has developed a substantial protocol for their Healthy Families home visiting program. More formal organization would promote greater awareness among entities; a code of ethics should be developed.
- Parenting education programs are often connected to education programs, and there is a need to develop and strengthen partnerships with schools, health care agencies, and other organizations.

Program Evaluation

- Some programs are adequately assessing process and outcomes, but there is a need for effective sharing of evaluation designs, instruments, resources, and ideas.
- Partnerships with universities meet a need – university-based systems have resources and incentives to publish. Measures of success must be identified.
- There is a direct link between evaluation and funding. This needs to be explored and strategies must be developed (e.g., collaboration, approaching funders jointly). The purpose of evaluation must be clarified.

Public Appreciation and Awareness of Importance of Parenting Education

- Many parents/caregivers experience extreme anxiety around parenting education. As one participant stated, “...if there have already been questions about the quality of their parenting, then taking a course or taking steps is almost admitting – or is evidence – that maybe there is something wrong.”
- There is a need to create an image of parents that is empowering. Parent support must be perceived as positive – a strength. Targeted, social marketing will impact the public value of parenting education.
- Provide incentives for coming to events, such as stipends, childcare, and/or transportation costs. This is analogous to preventative medicine, as noted by a participant, “You’ve increased your chances of success, and chances of success with children, by having parenting education.”

Recommendations and a Call to Action

At the conclusion of the Summit, findings from each of the breakout sessions were shared in a large group conversation. Many participants voiced appreciation for the ideas that had been generated during the exchanges between practitioners, and many who expressed their opinions articulated a renewed sense of energy. Although the larger group outlined no definitive steps, it is anticipated that participants will seek opportunities to follow up on a number of initiatives, and this paper is one step in that direction.

The following were noted as key recommendations:

- Establish a coordinating body/national clearinghouse that will share knowledge and resources, facilitate communication among entities, and support advocacy/policy efforts around credentialing, certification, and content
- Continue to work on developing plans to institute credentialing, certification and content knowledge and skills for parenting educators
- Organize funding strategies, and consider the connection between funding and evaluation
- Focus on technology in terms of communication and mode of delivery (e.g., podcasts, “webinars”)
- Empower parents as experts; foster partnerships with families and communities
- Study models from other disciplines to learn from successful practices
- Closely examine what has already been learned in individual contexts and review existing documents toward a desired efficiency that would streamline work in the field of parenting education.

Different organizations possess different resources and maintain different agendas. Harnessing the strengths that each agency brings to the field of Parenting Education would effectively unite the efforts that are currently operating independently. It is likely that several organizations identified at the Summit could oversee an area of need, respectively, and a coordinating body would then facilitate communication among bodies and the broader community, so identified.

Taking Action

In order to build upon the energy and momentum created at the Parenting Education Summit and carried out in subsequent months, the following are critical action steps that will ensure active participation in an inclusive and well-regulated manner, with clear systems of communication in place to sustain the efforts in focused areas:

- Join the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) to receive ongoing information and communicate with others in and interested in the field (<http://www.npen.org>).
- Families First will form an Advisory Council to directly influence ongoing initiatives and communicate with others who share common interests of a national and international scope (<http://www.families-first.org>).
- **Focus on Evaluation**
Although the field of parenting education is relatively new, much evaluation work has been done. Online access to high quality evaluation strategies and well-designed evaluation tools are, however, in great demand. Communication with funders is needed to help define what is useful across systems and possible for the field. For more information and to become involved contact Judy Nordstrom, NPEN member and Evaluation Committee Chair (judynord@frontiernet.net).
- **Focus on Credentials**
There are three kinds of credentials in the field of Parenting Education – a state license or certification, a national credential, and program-specific certification. In the parenting education field Texas and North Carolina have ladders of credentials that include peers to PhDs. Minnesota has a license based on a BS or MS degree. A few other states are moving toward some standardization of professionals as state governments begin funding parenting education programs. Some national organizations have begun conversations about a national credential. Many national university-based trainings and model programs issue certificates, and interest in credentialing is high around the country. Those interested in this area will help clarify issues and disseminate information. Contact Betty Cooke, Ph.D., NPEN member and NPEN Council Chair Elect, University of Minnesota (cooke047@umn.edu).
- **Focus on Advocacy**
This is an area much called for by parenting educators, who see it as helpful in their work. In the proactive form, documents and other forms of information that would be helpful in describing the field and its impact are needed for use with legislatures, in proposal writing, and with general audiences. A reactive form of advocacy is identifying media events that are counter to best practices in the field and relaying better information to the sources. To view current efforts and become involved contact NPEN at <http://www.npen.org> or Dr. Kirby Alvy at the National Effective Parenting Initiative (NEPI) at <http://www.effectiveparentingusa.org>.

The relationships between parents and children remain at the core of the dialogue. It is clear that the emphasis on relationships – between caregivers and children, parent educators and parents, and among parent support agencies – remains a strong motivator for sustaining a field that defines itself by action. It is these same relationships that have the potential to successfully carry the field into uncharted territory, one step at a time.

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