

Competencies of a Parent Educator: What Does a Parent Educator Need to Know and Do?

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This article examines efforts by organizations and states to describe the competencies of a parent educator, to explain what parent educators teach parents through parent education, and to show how that informs parent educator competencies. It summarizes examples of certification, licensure, and other accountability programs, and identifies the issues involved, along with ways practitioners can use these identified competencies to assess their level of competency. Finally, the article concludes with a call to continue developing certification and other accountability programs to insure quality in parent education.

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Ten years ago, Nick Carter (1996) wrote a report on the status of parent education in the United States in *See How We Grow*, where he states, "Probably the most critical issue facing the development of parent education is that of how practitioners are trained, supervised, and supported in their work with parents" (p. 38). He points out that the demands on practitioners are enormous and include the expectation to work across cultures, disciplines, and systems; master a growing and diverse body of knowledge; be adept at the processes and methods that truly strengthen families; and produce dramatic results in shorts periods of time with ever-decreasing dollars. A decade later, these demands have only increased with the complex circumstances of parents and families and the implications they have for the competencies needed in a parent educator.

Preparation for development of these competencies has most typically come in the form of in-service rather than preservice education for the broad array of practitioners who call themselves parent educators and are involved in providing parent education. These individuals may be social workers, psychologists, teachers, health providers, childcare providers, paraprofessionals, or volunteer parents, with training or education that ranges from a weekend workshop in a specific curriculum to a doctorate degree in parent and family education or a related field. The diversity of backgrounds of parent educators creates controversy about the degree and level of preparation needed and the nature of a parent educator's roles as an expert, facilitator, and collaborator with parents. This controversy complicates identification of what a parent educator should know and be able to do.

Before clarifying what a *parent educator* should know and be able to do, there is a need to identify what *parents* should know and be able to do to raise healthy, responsible

children. As will be evident in this article, a consensus is growing in regard to both. Once parent education competencies are articulated and agreement upon them increases, requiring certification or licensure can become one way to ensure that parent educators are well prepared and competent in their interactions with parents.

The controversy over whether or not parent and family educators should be certified or licensed has been a subject of discussion among practitioners for more than two decades. Discussion of recognizing parent education and the role of the parent educator through certification or other means has been a part of the activities of a number of national organizations, including the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN). Family Support America (FSA) has entertained discussions about the competencies needed for a parent educator as part of their family support movement. The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) has a certification program in which the certified professional is called a Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE). This certification requires knowledge in 10 areas, most, if not all, of which are considered relevant to parent education. In any of these discussions of possible certification or other standards for practice, the recognized first step is to identify the competencies needed to be an effective parent educator. Some type of certification, formal expectations, or standards for parent educators would not only lead to agreement about the competencies needed by a parent educator, but also give national attention to the fact that parent education is professional work. Without certification or some formal recognition, the field perpetuates the current situation of:

- Continuing to have well-intended, but often poorly prepared, individuals naively involved in parent education situations beyond their level of expertise;
- Continuing to have anyone working with a few popular parenting books and videotapes or DVDs practicing parent education;
- Continuing the growing oversimplification of complex parenting issues with offers of what appear to be easy, quick fix solutions;
- Solving parenting concerns as media entertainment; and
- Continuing to have parents seek out information and support without guidance as to what is accurate information and positive support.

This article first examines a number of efforts by organizations and states that describe competencies of a parent educator, looking at what parent educators teach parents through parent education and how that can and does inform the competencies needed of a parent educator. Second, the article summarizes examples of programs that have developed a certification or some other accountability process and identifies some of the issues involved in that process. The article includes a discussion of how practitioners can use these competencies as they are currently articulated to assess their level of competency. Finally, the article concludes with a call to continue the work of developing certification and other accountability programs to provide the quality leadership in the field that Carter (1996) called for a decade ago.

Efforts to Identify Parent Educator Competencies

University of North Texas Center for Parent Education and the Texas Registry of Parent Educator Resources

To identify core knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for parent educators and professionals working with families, the University of North Texas Center for Parent Education and the Texas Registry of Parent Educator Resources (Texas ROPER, a statewide network of professionals who work with parents) conducted 19 focus groups and telephone conferences with more than 400 professionals from various fields, including parent educators. In their Web-based document (Center for Parent Education, 2004), ROPER lists 10 core knowledge areas as most critical; subcategories within each knowledge area providing more detail that may be more pertinent, for example, for specific professions such as school social workers or home health visitors conducting parent education; a glossary of terms used; and Internet links for finding more information, training, and resources about specific knowledge areas. The “Core Knowledge Areas for Parent Educators and Professionals Who Work with Families” apply to families and children from ages 0–18 and include the following:

1. Child and Lifespan Development
2. Dynamics of Family Relationships
3. Family Life Education
4. Guidance and Nurturing
5. Health and Safety
6. Diversity in Family Systems
7. Professional Practice and Methods Related to Adult Learning and Family Support
8. School and Child Care Relationships
9. Community Relationships
10. Assessment and Evaluation

As an example of the level of detail provided in each area, three of the eight items included under Guidance and Nurturing are the following:

- Impact of nurturing behaviors on children’s development, ages prenatal through adolescence
- Differences between positive and negative forms of guidance and discipline and their long-term effects
- Guidance techniques, such as responsiveness, creating a safe environment, setting limits, goal-setting, role modeling, and others

National Extension Parenting Educators’ Framework

In a separate effort, Cooperative Extension System faculty from several universities developed the National Extension Parenting Educators’ Framework (NEPEF) (DeBord et al., 2002). The NEPEF was created in 2000 and extended the 1994 National Extension Parenting Education Model (NEPEM) of priority practices to be learned by parents. This framework includes priority practices and skills to be learned by parenting educators. “Priority practices are defined as significant aspects of parenting that contribute to high

quality and effectiveness in programs when implemented” (DeBord et al., 2002, p. 5). The NEPEF has two dimensions with six domains each—one dimension outlines the content or knowledge needed by parent educators and the other outlines the processes that parent educators need to work effectively with parents and children.

The content domain consists of the following six knowledge domains for parents and the corresponding priority practices:

1. *Care for Self*—includes knowledge about managing stress and family resources and getting and giving support to other parents.
2. *Understand*—includes focus on basic child development.
3. *Guide*—includes the importance of parent strategies that engage children in appropriate and desired behaviors.
4. *Nurture*—includes emphasis on the importance of teaching appropriate expressions of affection and compassion.
5. *Motivate*—includes the importance of stimulating children’s curiosity and search for knowledge.
6. *Advocate*—includes emphasis on the value of parents and children finding and connecting with community-based programs.

The process domain addresses the following six professional skills and abilities that parent educators need in order to determine and address the needs of parents:

1. *Grow*—refers to personal growth as a professional, knowing yourself and understanding how that affects relations with others.
2. *Frame*—refers to knowing theoretical frameworks that guide practice in the field of parent education.
3. *Develop*—refers to planning, marketing, and evaluating programs to educate parents.
4. *Embrace*—refers to recognizing and responding to differences in the populations being served.
5. *Educate*—refers to being an effective teacher, using delivery methods appropriately, and helping and challenging parents in their learning.
6. *Build*—refers to building professional networks to expand the field of parent education and being a community advocate.

This framework highlights both the interrelationship between the knowledge and skills desired for parents to learn and develop and the way in which they interface with the competencies needed by the parent educator.

Parent Education Core Curriculum Framework and Indicators

Another informative document is the newly developed Minnesota Parent Education Core Curriculum Framework and Indicators (PECCFI). This document was developed by the Minnesota Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) Curriculum Committee, associated with the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), and is posted on the MDE (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005) and NPEN websites (National Parenting Education Network, 2005) for review, use, and feedback. It parallels the content dimension of the NEPEF and also illustrates how content for parents can inform competencies for parent educators. One of the goals of the framework and indicators is to inform practice in parent education. The curriculum domains include Parent Development, Parent-Child Relationship, Early Childhood Development (because the

process was initially designed for use by ECFE parent and family educators who serve families with children 0–4 years of age), Family Development, and Culture and Community. Within each domain there are domain components and categories leading to the specific domain indicators for each category. Figure 1 illustrates this framework.

Fig. 1 Domain: Culture and Community

Domain Component: Family Support and Community Involvement

Domain Category: Support Networks

Domain Indicator: Parents support their children’s development when they build relationships with other family, neighborhood, and community groups.

Although this framework and the indicators within it have been developed initially for use in parent education curriculum planning in ECFE and other parent education for families with children 0–4 years of age, in the process of using them, it is becoming clear that the indicators can be adapted for use by parent educators to plan curriculum and develop lesson plans for a broad range of parents in many circumstances and with children of ages beyond early childhood. As with the NEPEF, what is taught to parents informs the competencies the parent educator needs.

Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Family Education Programs

Beginning in 1977, the Minnesota Department of Education also developed a set of Quality Indicators for Early Childhood Family Education Programs (Kellar & Minnesota Department of Education, 2001; Kurz-Riemer & Minnesota Department of Education, 2001) for use in program planning and self-assessment in five program components, one of which is the parent educator role in parent education. Program staff, individually or as a team, can use the quality indicators to rate the degree of implementation of the quality indicators. Examples of those in the parent educator role program component include the following:

- Staff (referring to those providing parent education) involve parents in setting the agenda and guiding the learning process.
- Staff link parents’ specific experiences to general principles of child development and parent–child relations.
- Staff encourage parents to identify and build on individual and family strengths.

These quality indicators function as a list of competencies to be achieved by parent educators in Minnesota’s ECFE programs.

Understanding Parent Development as an Important Parent Educator Competency

One important note about what is taught to parents and how that affects the competencies of a parent educator needs to be made. In the latest edition of *The Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design Handbook for Parent Educators* (Thomas, Cooke, & Scott, 2006) point out:

Parent education programs have traditionally sought to help parents learn new skills, knowledge, and attitudes and have offered parents support . . . It is becoming clearer that simply teaching parenting skills and giving parent information about child development, while undoubtedly useful for many parents, is unlikely to significantly affect the deeper qualities of the parent-child relationship. (p. 1)

Recent research on parenting shows that parenting itself provides a context within which parents grow and develop as parents and persons (Demick, 2002; Holden & Hawk, 2003). Parent educators need to understand this process of parent development and how to promote parent growth, which requires deeper processes and experiences than simple exposure to information and skill training (Thomas et al., 2006). The two frameworks reviewed previously reflect recognition of this important concept within the parent development domain in the PECCFI and the educate domain of the NEPEF.

Certification and Licensure Programs

National Council on Family Relations Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) Professional Certification

As indicated before, the National Council on Family Relations offers a Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) professional certification that includes many aspects of the competencies needed by a parent educator. It requires a minimum of a baccalaureate degree and at least two years of experience in family life education (if degree is in a family-related field; five years experience if degree is in a nonrelated field) (National Council on Family Relations, 2006). Applicants provide documentation of academic preparation, professional development, and work experience in each of the following Family Life Substance areas:

1. Families in Society
2. Internal Dynamics of Families
3. Human Growth and Development
4. Human Sexuality
5. Interpersonal Relationships
6. Family Resource Management
7. Parent Education and Guidance
8. Family Law and Public Policy
9. Ethics
10. Family Life Education Methodology

The NCFR (2004) offers a resource called *Tools for Ethical Thinking and Practice in Family Life Education*, which includes “Competencies for Family Life Educators” in the 10

areas required for CFLE certification developed by faculty in the Department of Child and Family Studies at Weber State University, Ogden, UT. Within each of these areas, competencies are listed for knowledge and understanding needed, such as knowledge and understanding of “Contemporary factors influencing the family, including technology, economics, natural disasters, employment, mobility, etc.” (p. 20) in the Families in Society area, and competencies are listed for skills and abilities needed such as skills and abilities to “Show respect for diversity in personal and social interactions” (p. 20) in the Families in Society area.

Minnesota Board of Teaching Parent and Family Educator License

Background. Minnesota is the only state with a Board of Teaching parent educator license. This license is required of parent educators employed in the public school Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) programs for all families in Minnesota with children from birth to kindergarten. The first state-sponsored parent educator licensure program was designed as part of the vocational education system to be a credential for the growing parent education movement of the 1970s in Minnesota. The vocational colleges at that time were very active in creating parent education programs and developing parent education curricula. ECFE was introduced in 1974 as a pilot project that rapidly expanded in 1985 when new legislation with increased state funding made it possible for any school district in the state to establish a program. At that time, policy studies looked at the issue of licensed teachers and recommended licensure as a way to insure quality staff. In 1989, after statewide hearings, two types of parent and family education Board of Teaching licenses (one including an early childhood component) were approved. The licenses were course- or credit-based, required a baccalaureate degree, and included required quarter or semester credits in courses in family structures and functions, family dynamics, child development, parent-child relations and parenting, adult learning and development, parent education methods, and a parent education practicum that incorporated many of the parent educator competencies identified previously (Palm, Rossmann, Cooke, Wolthuis, & Danforth, 1996).

This license changed in 2001, along with all Minnesota Board of Teaching licenses, to one that is competency-based but continues to require a baccalaureate degree and that teachers of parent and family education demonstrate knowledge and skills in the subject matter areas of understanding families, parent-child relationships, child development, and adult development.

Competency examples. In the subject matter area of understanding families, examples of the 15 competencies included are understanding (1) the parent’s role as primary socializer and educator of the family, (2) theories of family dynamics, and (3) family communication. Examples of the 11 competencies in understanding parent-child relationships are understanding (1) multidisciplinary descriptions of parenting practices and healthy parent-child relationships, (2) theories of parent-child interaction, and (3) the reciprocal nature of parent-child relationships (Minnesota State Board of Teaching, 2001b).

Standards of effective practice. In addition to the subject matter standard described, the educator, to receive the parent and family education license, also must meet the standards of effective practice required of all licensed Minnesota teachers that include standards in

- Student learning;
- Diverse learners;
- Instructional strategies;
- Learning environment;
- Communication;
- Planning instruction;
- Assessment;
- Reflection and professional development; and
- Collaboration, ethics, and relationships. (Minnesota State Board of Teaching, 2001a).

License availability. Currently four institutions of higher education in Minnesota offer the parent and family educator license as part of undergraduate or graduate programs or stand alone licensure programs. They are the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, St. Cloud State University, and Concordia College–Moorhead and St. Paul. The parent education licensure program in Family Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities can be taken strictly as a licensure program or as part of a Master of Education program. The parent education licensure courses in this program are in the process of being reconceptualized, updated, and converted to online delivery to make them more accessible to future parent educators throughout the state, nationally, and internationally. Because of awareness of the availability of preparation and licensure in parent education, people in Minnesota hiring a person for parent education in settings where licensure is not required frequently request that those who they hire have the parent education license.

Examples of Other Degree and Certification Programs

Institutions of higher education in other states where a license is not required offer undergraduate and graduate degree and certification programs in parent education. The following are examples of some of these programs:

- *North Carolina State University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro* offer a jointly administered Master of Science degree in Human Development and Family Studies with a concentration in Family Life and Parenting Education. This program includes coursework in Family Life Education, Family and Community Partnerships, and Advanced Theories and Principles of Parenting.
- *DePaul University in Chicago* recently has developed, as part of their School for New Learning, a 52-credit graduate program with a 20-credit certificate option in Parenting Education and Support that is grounded in adult learning principles and specifically addresses the competencies needed by parent educators and family support professionals working in many contexts. Learning takes place in the classroom, at students' worksites, and with online asynchronous discussions.

- The *Edmonds Community College Family Support Studies Program* long has offered a certificate program in parenting support and education that is articulated with Washington State University's Bachelor of Arts in Human Development. The community college program includes courses in Parent Development, Family Systems, Community Collaboration, and Home Visiting.
- In the mid-1990s, the State of New York, through Cornell University, initiated a *Family Development Credential Certification* involving 110 hours of classroom work in an empowerment model of working with families. Competencies taught in the courses parallel the themes of programs and competency lists identified and include Family Development, Building Mutually Respectful Relationships with Families, Working with Diversity, Home Visiting, and Worker Self-Empowerment. The coursework emphasizes contexts and processes of interaction with parents and families and places less importance on the content of parenting.
- *Iowa State University Continuing Education and Communication Services* offers courses and certification for professionals and volunteers who work with families. The modules offered can be combined for undergraduate and graduate credit. Areas of study include Understanding Child and Parent Development, Cultural Perspectives on Parenting, and Parent Learning in Small Groups.

These program descriptions include information related to the parent education competencies reflected in the state and national initiatives described earlier. Consistency in the competencies included in these frameworks and programs is high. Some competencies are very specific to parent educators, and some are broader competencies for family life educators, family support workers, or others working with families. Emphasis is placed on the content needed to educate parents about parenting, parent and child development, parent-child and family relationships, and the cultures and contexts in which these occur, as well as on the processes required to effectively deliver this content to parents and other family members.

Issues Related to Licensure and Certification Programs

Many people who identify themselves as parent educators are facilitators (including peer facilitators), paraprofessionals, and volunteers, and they, along with those who consider themselves to be professional parent educators, may not be able to meet the requirements of certification and licensure programs such as the CFLE, Minnesota's licensure programs, and other higher education certification and degree programs mentioned above. That has been a concern among those who value peer-facilitated and other grassroots community-based parent education where individuals sharing the experiences, culture, and economic status with the parents they serve can be especially effective (Powell & Cassidy, 2001). Yet, the material reviewed in this article shows a consistent picture of both the competencies needed by parent educators to effectively deliver education in interaction with parents and the content they need to know to address parents' interests and needs. Consensus evident 10 years ago (Carter, 1996) as to the body of knowledge and competencies needed by a parent educator appears to be even stronger today.

Using Competencies to Assess Parent Educator Level of Competency

In their book *Group Parent Education: Promoting Parent Learning and Support*, Campbell and Palm (2004) offer the idea that the development of parent educators, as with other professionals, “follows some specific pathways toward greater competency, comfort, and effectiveness” (p. 205). They outline three general stages of growth and development (novice, intermediate, and master teaching level) for parent educators in five areas of development: knowledge, group facilitation skills, teaching skills, professional identity and boundaries, and understanding diversity. For example, within the area of teaching skills, the parent educator at the novice level “understands adult learning styles”; at the intermediate level, he or she “plans and executes sessions with a variety of teaching methods but uses discussion as a primary method”; and at the master teaching level, he or she is “able to assess parents’ needs and styles and match methods accordingly and shows insight in planning and leading to meet diverse needs of parents” (p. 207). These Levels of Professional Development for Parent Educators begin to provide a better picture of the depth and breadth of the competencies needed by a parent educator and the processes and stages they need to go through to achieve high levels of performance in these competencies. The authors suggest that where the parent educator role is embedded within other professional roles, process toward mastery may be slower. These three levels provide a means of including the less prepared parent facilitator at the novice level, at the same time highlighting the complexities of the parent educator role. The levels also help professionals in fields other than parent education, who are practicing parent educators, identify where their strengths are and where they need to build expertise. For example, many social workers are likely to find themselves at or near the master teaching level in the area of group facilitation skills and less knowledgeable in child development, while public health nurses may demonstrate expertise in their knowledge of child development and have fewer teaching methods for varying content delivery with groups of parents.

Campbell and Palm (2004) emphasize reflective practice as an important aspect of the competencies of a parent educator and indicate that parent educator self-assessment is a good place to start this reflective practice. Their text includes a self-assessment checklist, *Parent Group Leader Competencies: A Self-Assessment Checklist*, as an example of a self-assessment tool for identifying group facilitation skills to practice and refine. This checklist, similar to the ECFE Quality Indicators, provides a means for parent educators to assess their competence when certification or other standards are not available.

Implications for Future Action

So what does all of this information about parent educator competencies mean? Is a national forum needed on the competencies of a parent educator where current sets of competencies are reviewed, others that may be missing are identified, and priorities are placed on those that are most critical for effective practice? For many years, there has been a call for a clearer picture of and greater agreement on what should be the competencies of a parent educator. This review has shown that an agreed upon set of core competencies is closer. These competencies provide a means for parent educators

coming from diverse professional backgrounds to assess their ability to do parent education. They also provide a standard for parents to judge the quality of their sources of information and support. Finally, they provide a basis on which to continue the discussion of developing certification and other accountability systems that will help assure the professionalism of the field of parent education. Such certification and accountability programs will assure professionals with different primary professional identities that they are upholding the high standards of their profession in this related field of parent education. Only then can a better recognized field with recognized practitioners working to achieve goals of improved parenting become possible. Only then can parents be assured that they are receiving the information, skills, and other opportunities for growth that they need to nurture their children toward healthy adulthood.

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