

Executive Summary

An instructional newsletter series project —*Parenting the Second and Third Year*— was implemented in Fond du Lac County starting in 1999 to address parent education needs.

This project follows the *Parenting the First Year* series, which is a monthly age-paced newsletter that continues through the child's first year. *Parenting the Second and Third Year* newsletters are received every other month throughout the child's second and third year of life. These newsletters were written by UW-Extension to accomplish two goals: to prevent child abuse and neglect, and to encourage competent parenting.

An evaluation of the *Parenting the Second and Third Year* newsletter project, utilizing a questionnaire survey, attained a response rate of 48%. Findings indicated the newsletter series was rated "very useful" as a source of parenting information by 44% of respondents.

Most parents reported that reading the newsletters caused

them to change their child-rearing behaviors in six key areas, each of which is predictive of child development gains. Of special interest, first-time parents reported the most positive change. Parents were able to describe specific changes in their child rearing practices that they attributed to reading the newsletters. These ranged from learning to be more firm in setting limits with their children, to reading more with them, to involving their children more in chores, to making their homes safer for their toddlers.

Continued support and funding of this project is recommended.

Acknowledgments

The *Parenting the Second and Third Years* instructional newsletter project could not have been completed without the assistance and support of the following:

- ♥ Community collaborators who have committed time, energy and funding into making *Parenting the Second and Third Years* available to families. They include the Fond du Lac Noon Kiwanis Club, Kiwanis Club of Fabulous Fond du Lac, the Lakeside Kiwanis Club, and the St. Agnes Hospital Women and Infant's Unit in Fond du Lac.
- ♥ Ann Kaiser, UW-Extension Office in Fond du Lac County, for newsletter distribution, survey distribution, organization of sample identification, data entry and compilation of written survey responses.
- ♥ Joan Wendt, volunteer at St. Agnes, for maintaining an accurate data base of addresses, for placing address labels on each newsletter, and for ensuring each family received the correct issue.
- ♥ Barbara Smith, Wisconsin Senior Employment (WISE) Program for initial review and organization of data, and compilation of comments for the written report.
- ♥ Sheila Etheridge for text and graphic production at UW-Madison.
- ♥ The 116 families, who took time out of their busy schedules to complete the evaluation survey.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and contribution of all these groups and individuals. As the authors, we assume full responsibility for the accuracy, conclusions, and any shortcomings of this report.

Introduction

The first three years of life are a critical period, both as a foundation for later child development and as a period in which new parents establish their patterns of child rearing.

If we want to help parents do their best at raising intelligent school children or respectful teenagers, the best strategy might be to provide useful parenting advice much earlier in the child's life, helping parents establish effective child-rearing styles right from the start.

Many factors influence one's parenting style. These range from the kind of parenting one received as a child to the stresses one currently faces in life. Most of these sources of influence are difficult to change, but one large exception is *information* that reaches the parent, changing knowledge and beliefs about child rearing. When it comes to receiving information, research confirms that most parents prefer printed matter: they would rather read a pamphlet at their leisure than attend a meeting on the same topic (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Simpson, 1997; Sparling & Lohman, 1983). This is true regardless of the parent's socioeconomic level, educational level (excepting those who cannot read), and race (Gotta, et al., 1977; Cudaback, et al., 1985).

We also know that highly incompetent parents --in particular those who abuse their children-- have inaccurate beliefs about children's abilities. They lack knowledge about what children are really like, and often have attitudes that are harmful to competent parenting, when compared to non-abusing parents (Okagaki & Divecha, 1993; Steele, 1980; Stevens, 1984). For example, they sometimes become angry when a baby spills its food, or cannot yet eat with a fork. Since lack of knowledge is one cause of incompetent parenting, and since parents seek child-rearing advice from printed materials, perhaps a newsletter could fill in these deficits in knowledge and attitudes. This was the insight that led to UW-Extension's statewide, instructional newsletter project.

A newsletter has several advantages as a parent education method. Since this newsletter is "age paced" (keyed to the child's age) and offers small amounts of information at a time, it can reach parents at a "teachable moment."

It is also low in cost, especially compared to other methods of reaching parents (such as home visits or classes). Because of its low cost, it can be used to reach every parent in the community. And because it arrives in the mail, it can serve hard-to-reach families, those who would be least likely to come to parent education programs. Thus it is well suited as a community-wide intervention for parents of young children (Riley, et al., 1991).

Over 50 evaluation studies of the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter series (Riley, et al., 1996) have supported its effectiveness at promoting competent parenting, including one study conducted in Fond du Lac County (Baumgartner, et al., 1994). These studies have consistently found that parents rate the newsletter “highly useful” for parenting advice more often than any other source of child rearing information. They report that reading the newsletters caused them to change their child rearing methods in specific ways that we know (from earlier research) should lead to better child development. More importantly, parents who were most at risk for difficult parenting, because of their socioeconomic stress or inexperience, reported the greatest positive changes in their behaviors.

In addition, we conducted a field experiment with the *Parenting the First Year* series in 1990, using 1100 Wisconsin families, with half receiving the newsletter series and half not. Those who received it had attitudes and beliefs significantly less like those of child abusing parents, and they also reported spanking or slapping their babies significantly fewer times in the previous week (Riley, 1997). Since this study was an experiment, it provides strong evidence that this Extension parenting program *caused* improvements in early parenting.

These findings suggested the likely value of producing and distributing a continuation of the project into the 2nd and 3rd years of life. Our *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletter series may help maintain the impacts of the first-year series so they do not fade away, and may also add new learnings that are needed during the toddler years. Child development in the toddler years brings new issues into parenting, including the explosive growth of early language, the beginning of peer relationships, and the normal push for autonomy by toddlers. The development of autonomy by young children, when it conflicts with the normal socialization pressure of parents, gives this age one of its unfortunate names: the terrible twos!

The Newsletter

Parenting the Second and Third Years is a 12-issue set of eight-page newsletters, each keyed to a specific two-month period in a child's second and third year of life.

Thus the parents of a 23 to 24 month-old receive a newsletter that describes age specific information such as: the physical, intellectual, and social skills being developed by children this exact age; activities parents can do to promote language development; how to prepare your child for toilet training; guidance and discipline ideas; and what to do when a toddler bites other children. Each newsletter also contains information that is less time specific, such as how to select

good childcare, prevent lead poisoning, or live with children who have difficult temperaments.

The newsletters were written by University of Wisconsin Extension, with the dual aim of preventing abusive parenting and encouraging competent parenting. They were written at the fifth-grade reading level (estimated by the Flesch formula, 1948) so that 91% of American adults can read them. The newsletters are periodically reviewed and updated.

The Fond du Lac County Project

With a successful collaboration in place for the *Parenting the First Year* project, it was only natural that the partners involved, enthusiastically supported the idea of continuing the parenting newsletter project into the second and third year of a child's life.

When *Parenting the Second and Third Years* became available, the partners met to discuss how to make distribution a reality. In fall of 1997 the collaborators piloted the newsletter series on a subscription basis. In Spring of 1999, Fond du Lac County was awarded a POCAN grant (Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) to provide home visitation services to first-time moms eligible for medical assistance. As a partner in the POCAN grant, UW-Extension shared the success of the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter series as a way to reach all parents with developmentally appropriate information about children in an age-paced format. The goals of the parenting newsletter project (to prevent child abuse and neglect and to encourage competent parenting) were consistent with the POCAN project goals. As a result, the POCAN project team agreed to fully fund the *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletter series beginning in October of 1999. This continued for

2 years.

In October of 2000 an evaluation study of the impact of the *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletter was conducted in Fond du Lac County. With almost 60% of the respondents rating the newsletter series as "very useful" as a source of parenting information and most of the parents reporting that reading the newsletters caused them to change their child-rearing behaviors, the original funders of the project made a commitment to increase their support for the project in order to continue the distribution of the series. Today, the *Parenting the Second and Third Year* newsletter series continues to be supported by the three local Kiwanis clubs, the St. Agnes Hospital Women and Infant's Unit, and UW-Extension.

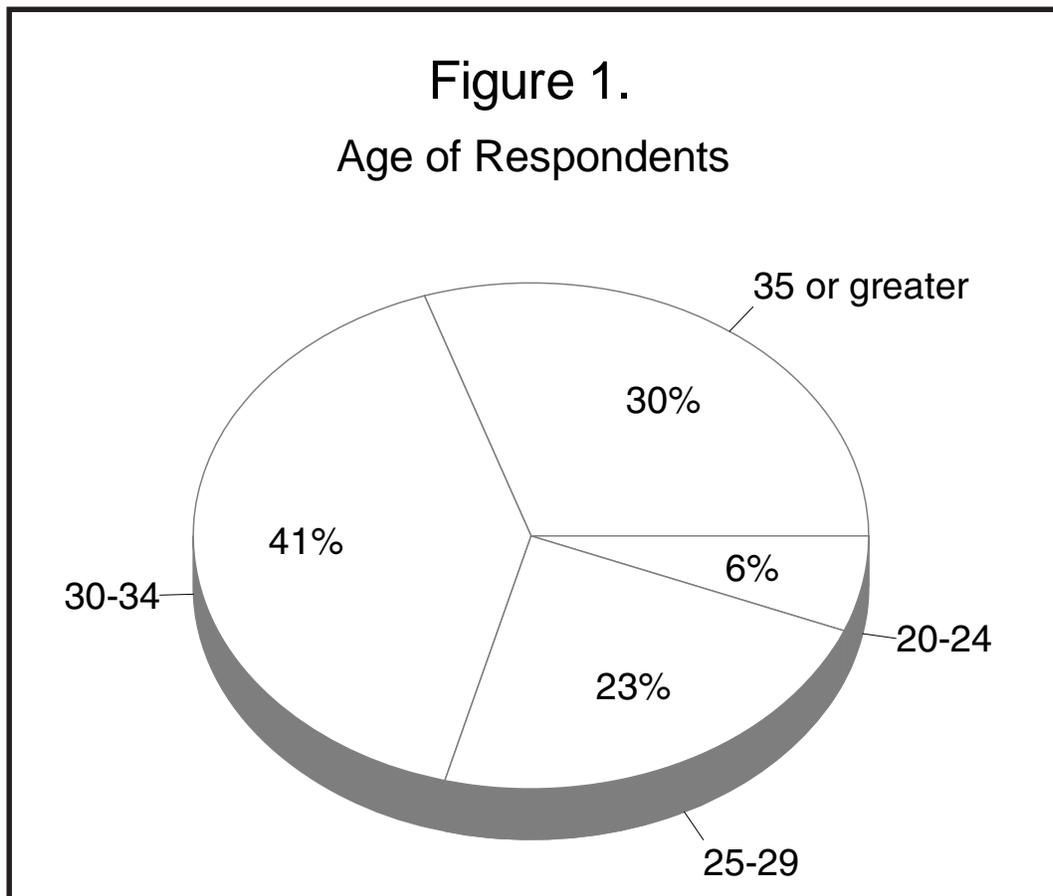
Given the considerable effort to produce and distribute these newsletters, we should cautiously ask if they are achieving their goal of

encouraging more competent child rearing among Fond du Lac County parents. With that question in mind, the evaluation study reported here was begun in February 2006 by sending a self-report questionnaire and stamped, return envelope to parents. A total of 244 questionnaires were mailed and 116 returned for a 48% response rate. Compared to many questionnaire surveys, this is a fairly high response rate, allowing us to say that the results reported here are not due to a small, vocal minority of parents, but rather are fairly representative of parents of young children in Fond du Lac county.

Due to the timing of the study, not all the respondents had received all 12 issues. In fact only 2% had. Another 25% received 9 issues, 27% had received 11 issues and the majority of respondents (46%) had received 10 issues. This means the parents responding had children somewhere between 29 months and 36 months old at the time they completed the survey.

Electronic data entry was completed in the Fond du Lac County Extension office. Statistical analyses were performed at UW-Madison, and this report was co-authored by faculty from UW-Extension and UW-Madison.

Figure 1.
Age of Respondents



Results

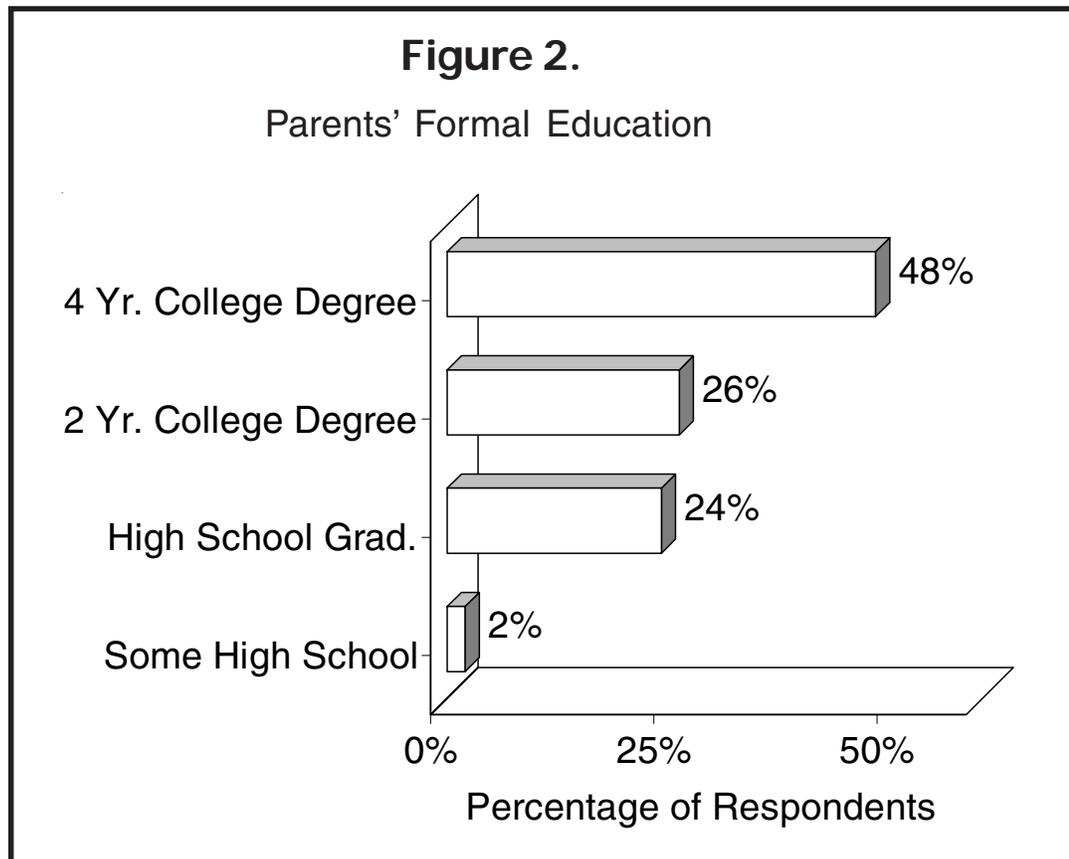
Prior to looking at the results, it is useful to take a look at the kinds of families who answered the survey.

All but one of the respondents were mothers. They ranged in age from 20 to 44, with a median age of 32. There were no teenage respondents, and only 4% were age 40 or older. The largest cohort was in the age range from 30 to 34. See Figure 1 on the previous page.

All but two of the parents responding to our survey were high school graduates. See Figure 2

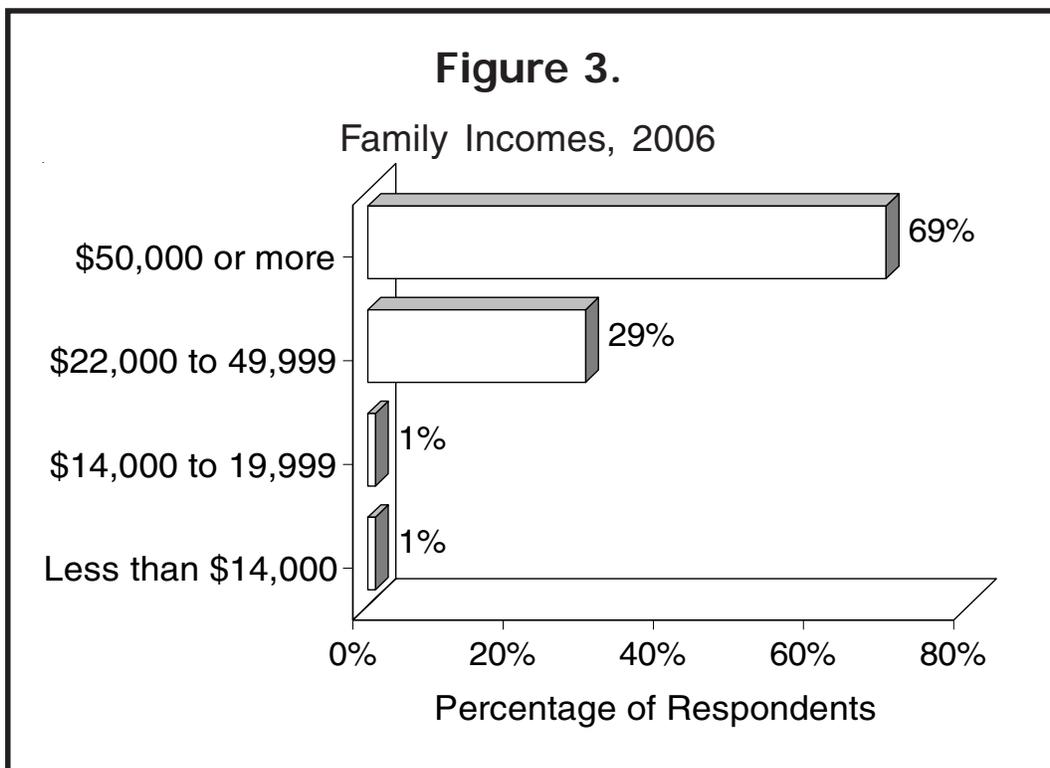
below. Twenty-four percent had stopped their education at high school graduation, while at the other extreme 48% had a 4-year college degree (or more). On the following page, Figure 3 shows that 2% of the sample reported family incomes of less than \$20,000, the poverty threshold for a family of four. Nearly 70% of respondents reported incomes of \$50,000 or more.

Fully 94% of the sample families



were composed of two adults living together (spouses or partners). One parent lived with the child's grandparents, and five lived alone. For half of the sample (50%), their two-year-old was their first child. At the time of the survey, 27% of respon-

dents had one child, 43% had two children, and the remaining 30% had from three to nine children.



How Useful Are the Newsletters?

The parents were asked to rate the usefulness of a number of common sources of child-rearing advice, all on the same 3-point scale (not useful - somewhat useful - very useful).

The *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletter was included last on this list, so that its usefulness would be clearly gauged in relation to the other sources. Figure 4 on the next page charts the percentage of parents who answered that each source was “very useful.”

Physicians or nurses received the highest rating at 55%, and other parents/friends the second highest at 48%. Relatives and in-laws and the *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletter were tied at 44%. Interesting to note, if one combines the responses from the scale using the categories of “somewhat useful” and “very useful,” then the newsletter, physicians/nurses and other parents are almost identical, 92%, 91% and 92%, respectively. When compared to other written materials or information available through the internet, the age-paced newsletter is clearly a more trusted and relied upon resource for parents. Parents wrote comments on the questionnaires that were consistent with this finding:

“Thank you so much for a GREAT resource! I think it is superior to any parent magazine because it is so age specific, concise, without

distracting ads and unbiased. It has helped me become a better parent. I have them all on file and have referred to them when I need to (I have 3 kids.) Thank you! Keep it up!”

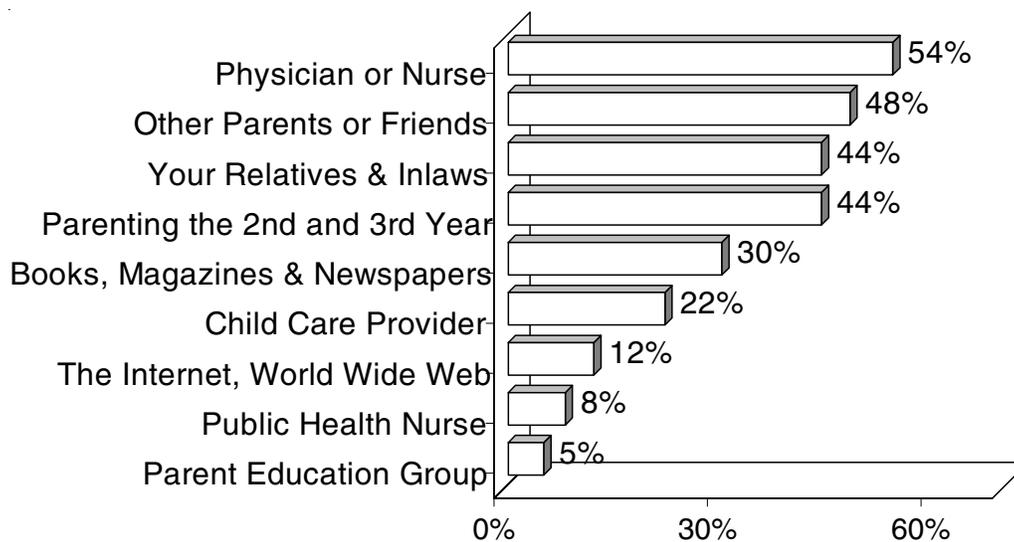
“Thanks for the newsletters. A fast read--which is all I have time for, yet informative. I read a lot. However, your newsletter may be the ONLY thing some parents read, so I’m always glad to see the “must know” kind of stuff, like no honey for babies, etc.”

“I look forward to the newsletter each month. I think it is great. It’s just the right format--not too long, easy to read. Much better than Parent’s magazine.”

“We find the newsletters very valuable...keep offering this service. I’m a teacher part time and work with many families who I wish would use many of the ideas in the newsletter. Even if a few parents catch on to one idea, it would be worth it for the sake of their children. Thank you.”

Figure 4.

**Usefulness of Each Source of Parenting Information
for Parents**



NOTE: Other possible responses were "Somewhat Useful" and "Not Useful".

Readership of the Newsletters

Over a third of all parents (37%) reported they read “all articles in all issues” of the newsletters, and almost every parent who responded to our survey (97%) reported reading at least some of each issue.

When parents were next asked, “What do you usually do with the newsletters?” over a third (35%) said they “keep and file” them, and eight percent said they give them to someone else to read. Fifty seven percent said they “throw them away.”

When asked if anyone else reads their copy of the newsletter, 57% of respondents said yes. The most common subsequent readers are shown in Figure 5 on the following page. In most families (53%), the spouse or partner reads the newsletters. Many of the questionnaires had comments on this point:

“My husband and I really appreciate the newsletter. It gives tons of ideas, perspectives and true information. We are grateful to receive this free tool.”

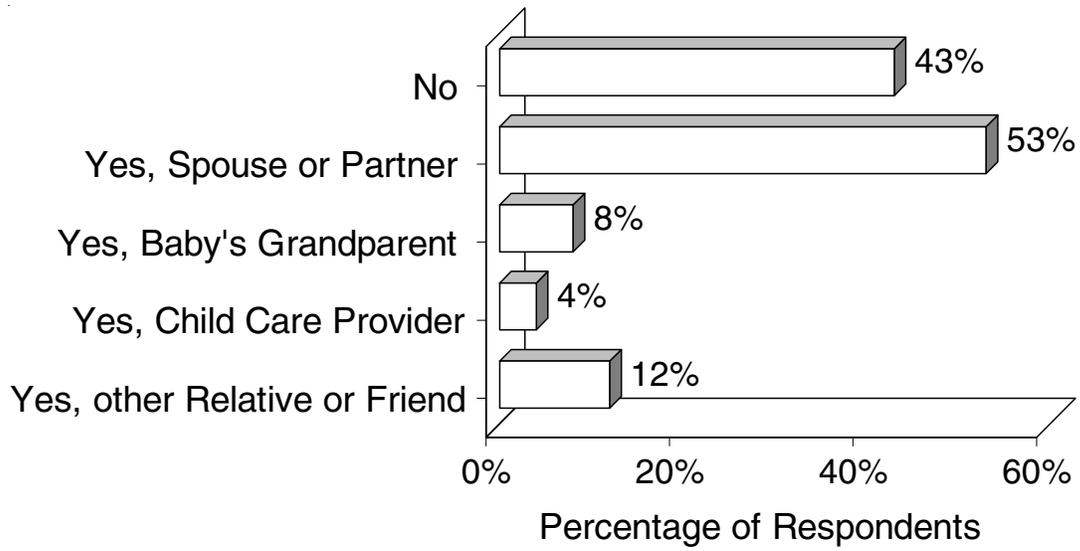
“I love getting the issues and share them with family and friends with little ones that don’t live in this area.”

“They were very helpful, easy to read, quick snippets of important information. They were short enough that my husband would often read them. Thanks for doing what you do!”

The newsletters were read by the child’s grandparents in 8% of cases and by other relatives or friends 12% of the time. In all, 196 readers were reported for the 112 newsletters, indicating that readership nearly doubled by sharing.

Figure 5.

**Does anyone else read your copy
of the newsletters?**



Have the Newsletters Caused Improvement in Child-Rearing Behaviors?

One of the major goals in distributing the newsletters was to influence positive behavior changes in parents of toddlers. Before asking parents any specific questions, we first asked them to tell us, in their own words, if “reading the newsletters led you to do anything differently with your child?”

More than two-thirds of parents (70%) were able to describe a specific change they had made in their child rearing methods, as a result of reading the newsletters. Here is a small sampling of the kinds of things they wrote:

“I often take ideas from the newsletter on behavior management or gain insight into their developmental stages.”

“Has given me practical ways to handle stages of development. Also has given fun ideas to play with my kids.”

“I have used some of the activities and games described as well as the discipline techniques.”

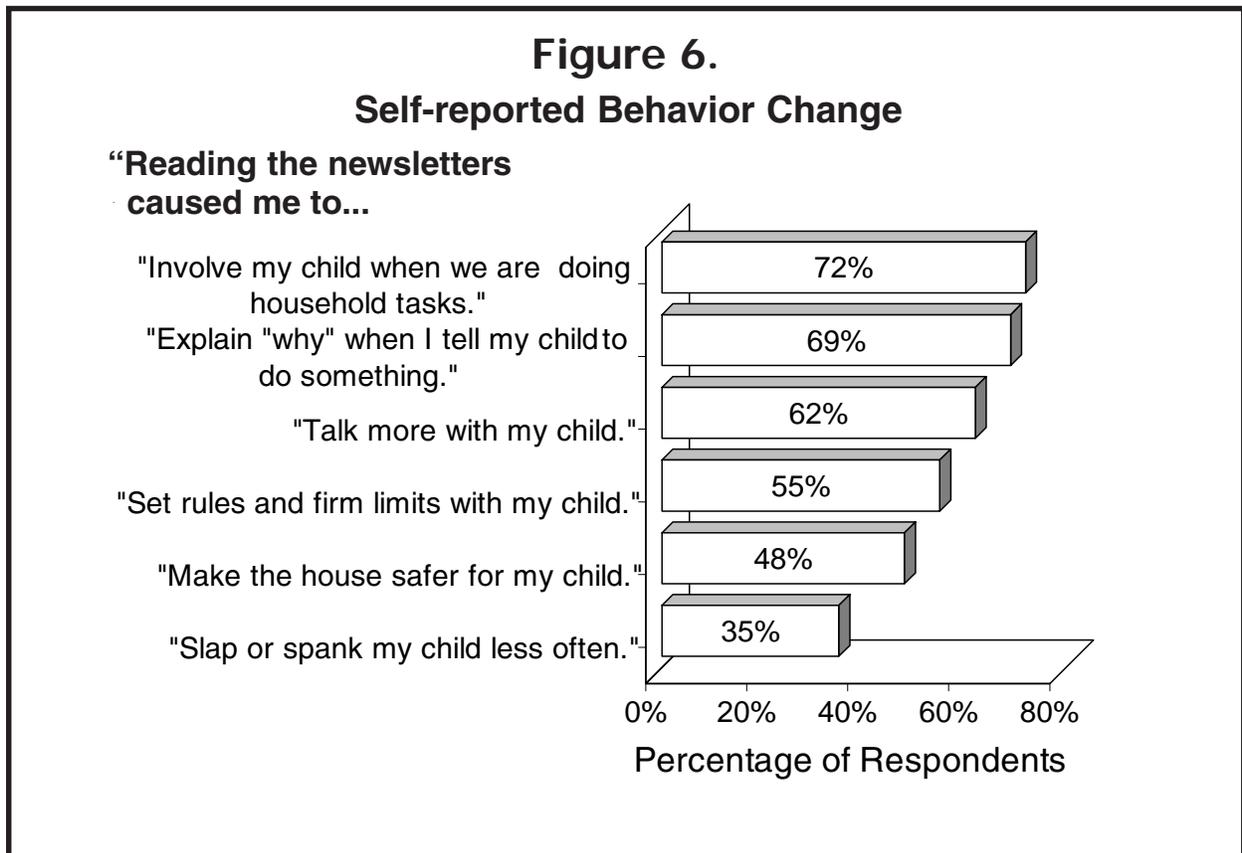
“The newsletter has helped me be more attentive to his needs and has also helped me to realize that playing with him is a learning tool.”

On inspection, these specific, self-reported changes were highly consistent with the advice in the newsletters. For example, each newsletter issue contains a section on guidance and discipline ideas. Parents learn that discipline means teaching, as well as the importance of setting limits and explaining the reasons behind rules. The newsletters include information on child development so parents know what behaviors to expect for their child at each age. Most issues also include games parents can play with their children to help them learn and grow.

Parents were next asked if “you believe the newsletters have influenced you with your 2-year-old child” in six key areas. These six specific parental behaviors were selected because prior research has shown they predict better intellectual, emotional and social development in young children (Belsky, et al., 1984; Clarke-Stewart, 1988; Edwards, 1995; Pettit, Bates &

Dodge, 1997). These child-rearing behaviors relate to providing toddlers with language interaction, safe exploration, emotional nurturance, responsiveness, and family involvement.

The self-report items are listed in Figure 6, which shows the percent of parents who reported the newsletter caused each positive behavior change. As can be seen, approximately one-third to three-fourths of the respondents felt they were doing more of each behavior as a result of reading the newsletter. The importance of each of these parenting behaviors will be described below.



1. Benefits of family involvement in chores.

According to most parents (72%), the newsletters had the greatest impact on “involving my child when we are doing household tasks or chores.” Besides making parents’ lives easier, getting young children to help with household chores is actually very good for children too.

The best evidence for this is from a remarkable 40-year study that followed boys from inner city Boston until they were adults. The researchers found that those boys who had worked either at regular part-time jobs or regular household chores grew into happier, more competent adults than their peers (Felsman & Vaillant, 1987). This was true regardless of their level of intelligence, or the socioeconomic status of their parents. The authors suggested that working may have fostered a sense of self-efficacy (a belief that “I can succeed if I try” and “I am in control of my future”) which helped the boys to develop resilience in managing the challenges in their lives.

Do most families assign chores to their children? One study that looked at the meaning of work in the family found that over 80% of parents with children under four years of age said they assigned chores to teach their children responsibility and to help build character (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981).

Parents also expressed the belief that having children help with chores created a sense of family unity.

But what about toddlers? Aren’t they a little young to be doing chores? Actually, toddlers love to copy their parents, and are willing partners in household chores. And since the development of autonomy and independence is so much a part of the toddler years (that’s why the word “no” figures so prominently in toddler speech!), they take great pride in learning to do simple chores, like setting the table, without any help. One study actually experimented with getting preschoolers to start doing household chores, by assigning them as “homework.” The first finding of the study was that the children felt a great sense of pride in being able to accomplish the chores. Another finding was that the parents in this study were initially uncertain their children could handle the chores, but then were pleased by their children’s enthusiasm and feelings of success. These researchers suggested

that "parents can encourage independence, self-reliance and healthy self-concept by involving children in household tasks that are appropriate for their level of development" (Wallinga & Sweaney, 1985, p. 4).

The *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletters had several articles encouraging parents to involve their toddlers in chores, emphasizing that "children learn best when parents do simple tasks with them, like cooking, cleaning, and other chores. By helping your child succeed at

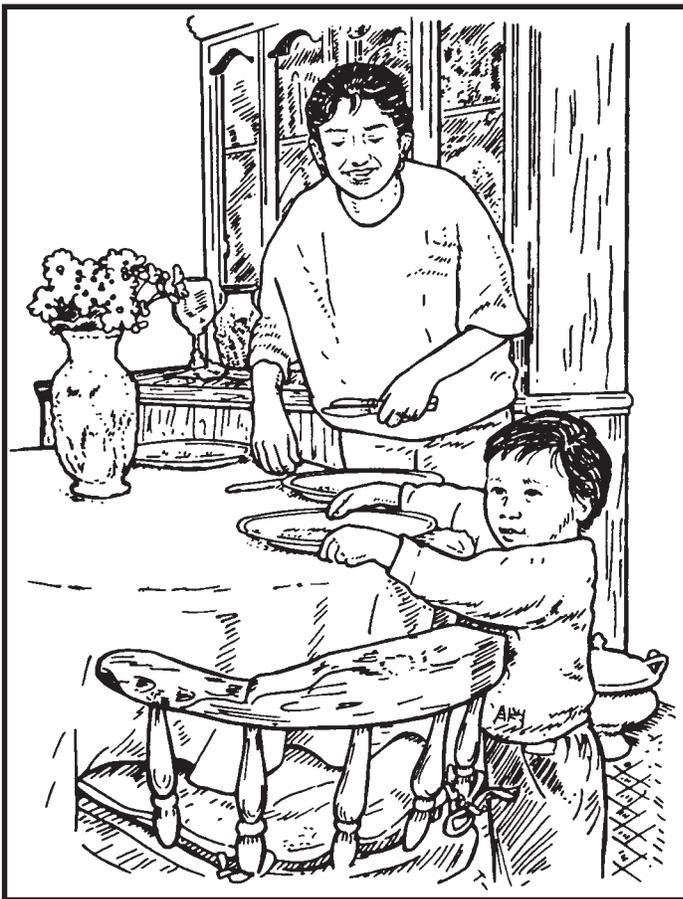
doing age-appropriate household chores, children will learn to do these tasks on their own." The newsletter also advises that parents praise small successes, rather than scold the inevitable mistakes that young children will make. While parents should keep tasks simple and not expect too much, they should expect children to try. A list of possible chores that toddlers can help with is provided in the newsletters. This list includes wiping up accidental spills, picking up toys, putting books on shelves and helping set the table. "In helping, your child will begin to learn responsibility, and will develop pride in being useful." Parents made comments about involving their child in chores:

"I involved her in baking much earlier, in age, than I would have without the newsletters."

"He helps water plants, putting away dishes from dishwasher and loves helping with laundry."

"I ask him to help hold the dust pan when I sweep - he feels like a big help."

"Helps me wash windows--I give a paper towel. She will throw dirty laundry down the chute and she will put canned goods in the cupboard. I let her stack them the way she wants."



2 & 3. Benefits of setting rules and limits, and explaining “why”.

If there is any single topic about which parents want to learn more during the toddler years, it is probably child guidance and discipline. It is the “job” of toddlers to begin to assert their own autonomy as independent human beings, but parents have the “job” of providing “socialization pressure” so children learn how to get along with others and be less self-ish. These two agendas often come into conflict, which isn’t easy for either toddlers or their parents!

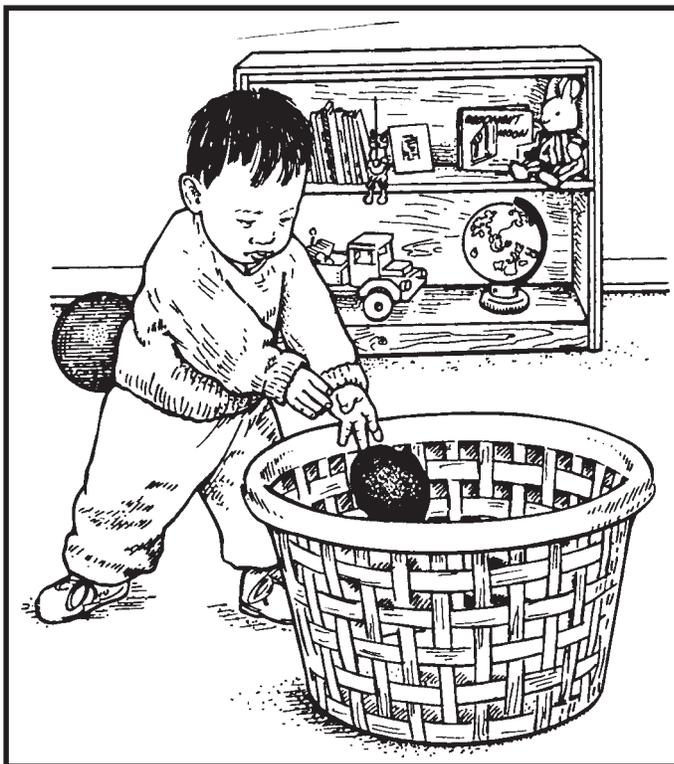
According to our respondents, the newsletters had an impact on the methods of child guidance and discipline used by parents. About 2 in every 3 parents (69%) reported that “Because of the parenting newsletters, I am more likely to explain “why” when I tell my child to do something.” Over half (55%) agreed that “Because of the parenting newsletters, I am more likely to set rules and firm limits with my child.” These two features of parenting –being warm and responsive on the one hand, but demanding on the other— seem to some people like opposites, but research of the last 30 years has shown that the most successful parents, who raise the most competent children, manage to combine high levels of both.

Research conducted across the U.S. since 1970 has repeatedly found that “authoritative parents,” who are warm and responsive but also demand an appropriate level of maturity, have children who are more competent. “Authoritative parents remain receptive to the child’s view but take responsibility for firmly guiding the child’s actions,” according to Baumrind (1996, p. 412), one of the leading researchers. Authoritative parents set firm limits, apply them consistently and provide reasons for their rules. Parents who are high in either responsiveness/warmth or in demandingness, but not in the other, are called “permissive” or “domineering,” and research shows that their children do not develop quite so competently as the children of authoritative parents.

The research on this style of child guidance includes many studies of parents of toddlers. For example, a study by Howes and Olenick (1986) found that toddlers who had parents (and child care providers) who set firm, consistent limits were more compliant than toddlers who weren't given consistent guidance. In fact, inconsistent discipline has been shown to be related to behavior problems in both young and older children (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Some researchers believe that an authoritative parenting style is effective because it communicates to the child a comforting sense of parental authority, a sense of respect for the child, and a

recognition of the child's ability to understand (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). This in turn creates an atmosphere in which the child is more receptive to parental influence. "Children reared in such families typically show higher self-esteem, are more independent but at the same time more likely to comply with parental requests, and may show more altruistic behavior as well" (Bee, 1995).

The *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletters advise parents to set a few simple, easy to understand rules and then stick to them. When children test these limits, as they all do, parents are advised to repeat the rules in a calm manner. "When limits are clear and enforced all the time, children learn how to succeed within these limits," and they are less likely to become spoiled. "Children need and want reasonable limits." The newsletters also inform parents that explaining the reasons behind rules teaches children to be more cooperative and to behave well even when not being watched. By comparison, children whose parents use power tactics such as spanking or withdrawing affection are likely to behave only when they know the parent is watching them.



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When children understand the reasons for rules they are more likely to remember and follow them. When parents remain firm, eventually children will learn that parents really mean what they say. Every issue of the newsletter provides parents with alternative ways to provide child guidance and discipline, so parents have many options. In their written comments, many parents wrote about starting to be more firm in using limits:

"This helps me know what kinds of limits are best and to understand not to get too mad if they don't do what you want."

"My husband gets frustrated. The newsletter made us realize maybe we were expecting too much."

"I found I gave in all too often, but



now he does go to bed on time and without a whole lot of fuss. He's 2 1/2."

They also wrote comments about explaining "why."

"It just makes sense after reading the newsletter. I get more cooperation from my strong willed daughter if I explain "why"."

"She listens better when I explain."

"Because if they know the reason why, they will be more able to understand."

"Our 2 year old now asks to "talk" when we have time out."

"I don't "yell" hardly at all--instead I explain in quiet voice."

When we combined the responses to these two questions, we found that 47% of the parents responding to our survey believed that the newsletter series had prompted them to both

- (a) be firmer with their child (consistent, demanding of mature behavior, etc.), and
- (b) be more responsive to their child (explaining reasons for rules, etc.).

This combination is the core of what we mean by authoritative parenting.

4. Benefits of language interaction.

Parents also reported that the newsletters encouraged them to “talk more with my child” (62%). This is important because of the explosion of language development during these toddler years, when children are primed for acquisition of their first language. Research had provided clear evidence that the amount and type of every-day speech between parents and toddlers has a big impact on their learning.

A review of the research by Clarke-Stewart (1988) revealed a large number of studies that consistently found a significant correlation between the amount that mothers talk with their children and the children’s language development. “Talking” includes mothers asking questions and expanding on what their children say. “Talking to a child about whatever the child is focusing on at a given moment is an important contributor to vocabulary

growth,” say researchers Berger & Thompson (1996, p. 244). Indeed, Olson, Bayles & Bates (1986) found that mothers’ responsiveness to their children’s speech was significantly related to children’s vocabulary size (as well as their sociability and general intellectual ability) both at 13 months and 24 months. This was an important finding because children with larger vocabularies score higher on measures of language and cognitive maturity at age two. Another study found that parents who read more to their children and asked questions about the stories had two-year-olds who scored higher on vocabulary tests and used more complex grammar (Whitehurst, et al., 1988). And when children are more skilled in language development they generally have an easier time learning to read when they start school (Bee, 1995).



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The *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletters suggest to parents that they can help their toddler learn words by describing what the parent or child is doing. They also recommend that parents elaborate on what their child says to help them learn new words. Some suggestions of games that parents can play to expand their toddlers' vocabulary are provided, such as sorting soft and hard or big and little things into different piles, or naming pictures in a book and having the child point to them. The newsletters tell parents that research has shown "children who were most intelligent had parents or caregivers who talked to them a lot, encouraged

them to use language and did things with them that helped them learn and practice language." Parents responding to our survey gave many examples of specific ways they had learned to help promote their child's early language abilities. For example:

"We talk the entire way home from day care about his day. His memory is getting better about that. He actually remembered what he had for lunch and usually he doesn't."

"Read books, play with his toys, talk about the world around us when we go places."

"Have him tell stories at bedtime."

"Maybe not talk more, but it (the newsletter) gave me good questions to ask."

"It helped me to know what to expect. I was able to acknowledge son's speech (lack of) early."



5. Benefits of promoting safe exploration.

Almost half the parents (48%) reported that the newsletters encouraged them “to make the house safer for my child.” This is crucial to child development because so many accidents are to very young children, and also because a safe home allows more of the exploration that helps children learn.

The toddler age is especially prone to accidental injury because children are learning to walk, run, and climb, so that homes that were safe last month may become terribly unsafe this month. As we all know, infants and toddlers are also likely to put anything they grab into their mouths, but as toddlers their reach can be suddenly and greatly extended.

According to Dr. Jana Williams, a pediatrician at Texas Children’s Hospital, “more young children die or are disabled from preventable injuries than from . . . any disease.” She concludes that “The easiest way to eliminate childhood injuries is to prevent them... Childproofing a home is essential” (Kids Source Online, 1999). The most common fatal injury to young children, accounting for 51% of fatalities, is caused by airway obstruction due to such things as small toys, or foods like peanuts, grapes or hot dogs.

Burns are responsible for another

20% of fatal injuries to young children. An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that there have been at least 183 deaths from accidental strangulation by pull cords for window coverings between 1981 and 1995, and “Ninety-three percent of victims were 3 years of age or younger” (Rauchschwalbe & Mann, 1997, p. 1696). Accidental poisoning of young children is also a major problem (Poison Prevention Week Council, 1999). According to the American Association of Poison Control Centers (2006) over one million children under six years of age were accidentally poisoned in 2004. More than 90% of these occurred at home (Center for Disease Control, 2006). A study conducted at the Valley Children’s Hospital in Madera California found that out of 115 children admitted for fractures due to accidental falls, 87 of these were for children five and under (American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, 1999).

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These statistics emphasize the necessity of making sure homes are safe for toddlers.

The newsletters include many articles advising parents on ways to baby-proof their homes. They suggest getting down on the child's level to see what needs to be changed to make things safe.

The newsletters also discussed a number of ways to baby-proof homes, such as placing medicines and cleaning supplies in locked cabinets, putting away small objects that can present a choking hazard and covering electrical outlets. Comments from parents show they used this advice:

"Knob covers so she can't open the back door or basement and lock under sink where cleaning supplies are."

"Close toilet lids, put toys in lower drawers in bathrooms and pots & pans, Rubbermaid items in lower cabinets and sharps in upper cabinets."

"Lots of safety--thanks to the newsletter."

Having emergency numbers by the phone, such as the poison control center, is advised in the newsletters. There is also information on how to fix the cords on window coverings to eliminate the danger of strangulation.



The newsletters let parents know that injuries are the greatest threat to their child's life and health. Many strategies to prevent injuries are provided. These include using approved car seats, never leaving a child alone around water, using safety gates and window guards, and avoiding foods such as popcorn, peanuts, whole grapes or round pieces of hot dogs. Some parents listed safety gates as something they learned from the newsletters:

"We moved the coffee table out of the way, used child safety gates, bed gates, outlet plugs, etc."

To prevent serious burns the newsletter advises parents to turn the temperature of their water heater down to 120 to 130 degrees and to turn handles of pots to the back of the stove so they can't be easily grabbed by curious hands. There is also information about the dangers of lead poisoning from paint and water pipes. Parents who make use of the safety tips in the newsletter should provide more opportunities for their child to explore and grow in a safe environment. Comments from parents suggest this:

"I have thrown out unsafe toys."

"Keep anything of potential danger out of reach and out of site."

"Child proofing all that can cause danger."

"Made me more aware of the dangers around the house."

A second benefit of safe homes is that parents can then allow their children more opportunity to explore, which researchers call "floor freedom." The newsletters state that "children learn more when they are free to explore," and research backs up this claim. Letting children explore safely enhances their "potential for intellectual growth, skills mastery, and self-esteem" (Berger & Thompson, 1996, p.284). One famous scientist, the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, suggested that toddlers are like "little scientists" who learn by actively experimenting with objects in their environment (Miller, 1993). "Locomotion provides children with new opportunities for learning about their world. They can manipulate objects and learn about size, form, and relationships of objects" (Brazelton, 1989, p. 226). The newsletters say, as research has found, that young children who are allowed to explore end up knowing more by the time they start school.

6. Benefits of reducing use of physical punishment.

The newsletters also caused parents to “spank or slap my child less often” (35%), according to the parents’ own reports.

Research on the occasional use of physical punishment has produced mixed results. The most consistent finding in the past 50 years has been that parents who use physical punishment often, as their primary method of disciplining children, end up with children who are aggressive toward others and have only moderate levels of self-control (Eron, et al., 1991; Weiss et al., 1992). For example, one study found that the mothers who relied primarily on physical punishment (spanking or slapping their children) when their toddlers were 14 months old ended up with children who were less compliant by 21 months of age.

Their children also scored lower on the Bayley Scales of Infant Development (Power & Chapieski, 1986). When asked, most parents say they realize spanking is only effective in the short term and that they “would use alternatives if effective alternatives were available” (Graziano et al., 1996, p. 847).

While these findings are still considered valid, recent research has forced two changes in our views of physical punishment. First, several studies have found that physical punishment is related to better outcomes, not worse, for children from African-American families (Deater-Deckard, et al., 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997). The reason for this difference is not known but the second new finding may explain it: recent research has begun to find positive outcomes for children when physical punishment (spanking) is used in specific ways.

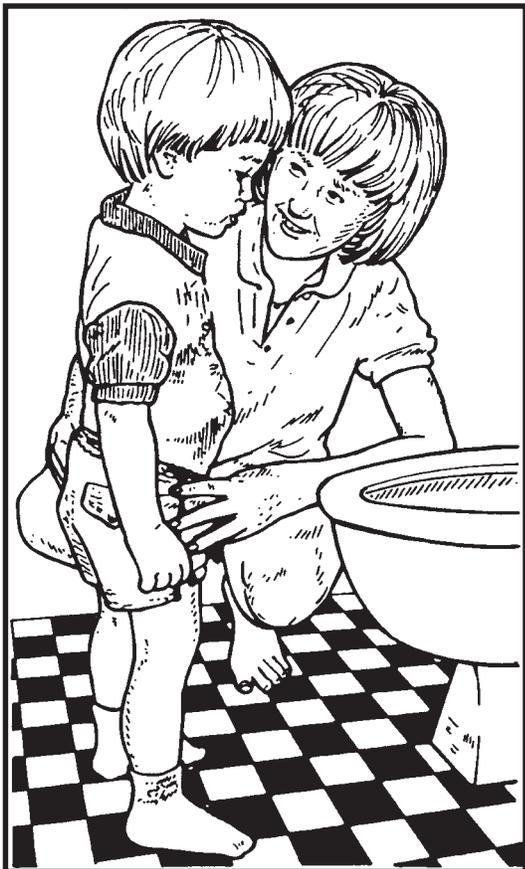


After reviewing this new body of research, Baumrind (1996) concluded that "the prudent use of punishment within the context of a responsive supportive parent-child relationship" can be a useful tool in child guidance. However, she also notes that physical punishment can be harmful in the context of a harsh parenting style. The research supports both conclusions: the effect of spanking depends upon when and how it takes place.

The danger is that for those parents who use physical punishment as their primary discipline method, especially in stressful

circumstances, it can rapidly escalate into child abuse (Graziano, 1994). For that reason, most researchers suggest that we should provide parents with many different methods of child guidance and discipline, so they are not limited to using only physical punishment. And that is exactly what the *Parenting the Second and Third Years* newsletter series does: it provides many alternative means of child guidance.

The newsletters explain that children learn correct behavior more readily with patient teaching than with punishment. The newsletters emphasize that parents need to be able to discipline children at times, but "Those who study young children's development generally agree that spanking and other physical punishment . . . are not necessary for discipline." In particular, if we wish our children to internalize the controls we place on them, then we need alternatives, since "Physical punishment does not teach children to control themselves."



The newsletters provide examples of many effective ways that parents can teach good behavior, such as “catching” your child being good and praising him/her, showing your child how to do something right, putting away things that shouldn’t be touched, offering choices (if appropriate) to encourage cooperation, and being sure your child gets enough rest. If children misbehave, the newsletter suggests using the strategy of a “time out.” This gets the point across to the child that the parent means business, while allowing both parent and child a chance to calm down. Parents who learn to use these alternative discipline techniques are likely to reduce their reliance on spanking.

In their written comments, many parents reported learning to use time outs from reading the newsletters:

“I use time out and taking things away.”

“We have a kitchen chair as the “time out” area. My child will sit in the chair for as many minutes as his age.”

“I would not spank or slap regardless. He sits on the “naughty step” for a time out.”

“I try a time-out and sit in chair or redirect her with something else.”

Which Parents Need Our Help the Most?

We have special concern for some parents, for whom parenting a toddler might be especially difficult. For example, first-time parents are often inexperienced, and therefore we might expect them to have more need for child-rearing information.

Indeed, studies have found that mothers of first-borns were less comfortable with their babies than were mothers of later-borns (Wolkind & DeSalis, 1982), and that parental experience was related to increased maternal confidence

(Zahr, 1991). Other studies have found that first-time mothers had more concerns about their infants (Kronstadt et al., 1979). For these reasons, we contrasted the self-reported behavior changes of first-time and experienced parents.

Category	Number	Percentage
First-time	54	51
Experienced	52	49

Effects on First-Time Parents?

The group of first-time parents differed from experienced parents in all six key areas of behavior.

While some of these differences were small, there were statistically significant differences in three areas. First-time parents were 32% more likely to say that reading the newsletter caused them “to involve my child when we are doing household tasks or chores”, and 24% more likely to say that reading the newsletter caused them “to talk more with my child” and “to explain why when I tell my child to do something.” See figure 7 on the following page.

First-time parents are inexperienced, and therefore it is no surprise they appreciated the newsletters. In fact, some parents’ comments seemed to be telling us that the newsletters were helpful because they were first-time parents.

“Keep the newsletters coming. I enjoy them. I especially thought my newsletter was helpful when my daughter was very young because my husband and I are first time parents.”

“I love the newsletter. I hope they continue. I don’t have anyone to ask for current advice. I love the part that tells me how they are feeling, how they want to play, how they learn. Keep them coming.”

“The newsletter is a wonderful tool for new moms and ones who need reminders on things they’ve forgotten. Thank you for sending them to me. They were very informative and helpful, even if I didn’t agree with everything in them.”

But other, experienced parents told us it was helpful to them too:

“I really felt it was very helpful, especially with my first, but also a nice reminder with the second but not as much time to read.”

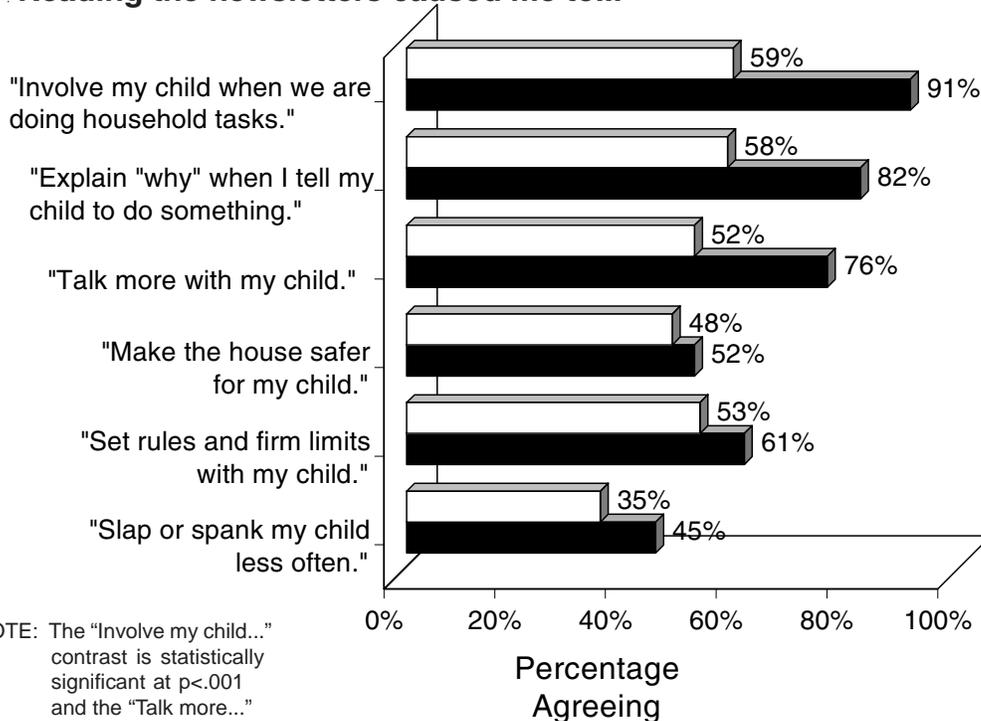
“My children range in different age groups so it’s nice to compare back then to now advice.”

“I am the parent of two children (a third on the way). When I had my first, I read every one, every part. With my second, I’d skim over it and will probably do the same with my third. I think the newsletters are very informative. With my first I saved the letters and passed them on to my niece who lives in Milwaukee. Life gets a little crazier with 2 & 3 more, so I don’t always make the time to read them all, but do still skim over parts that catch my attention, such as the game ideas.”

Figure 7.

Effect of Parenting the 2nd and 3rd Years Newsletters on “First-time” as Compared to “Experienced” Parents

Reading the newsletters caused me to...



NOTE: The "Involve my child..." contrast is statistically significant at $p < .001$ and the "Talk more..." and "Explain why..." contrasts are statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Percentage Agreeing

Legend: Experienced First-time

In fact, even early childhood professionals found value in this newsletter:

"I am a Marian College grad in ECE/EE degree so a lot of what I do as a parent was learned as being a teacher...although I did find the newsletter to be a good support and validation of what I was doing."

Can We Trust These Results?

How reliable are self-report answers, where people answer questions about themselves?

We know that such questions, if phrased carefully, can be accurate, but can also be prone to some well-known sources of inaccuracy.

The two most common sources of error in self-reports are Response Set and the Social Desirability bias.

“Response Set” refers to the tendency of some respondents to answer all questions the same way, for example with a “yes” response. The “Social Desirability Bias” is the tendency of respondents to exaggerate their favorable attributes or pleasing responses (people like to report “good news” in their questionnaire responses). Depending upon how they are worded, questions can elicit greater or lesser amounts of this bias. People also differ in this regard: some are more likely to exaggerate their answers so as to provide a more pleasing answer, while others are less susceptible to this bias.

One way to check for the intrusion of social desirability bias into our results is with a “lie scale.” Using this method, we inserted two items into our list of outcome questions. Each item asked about something that might have been in the newsletters, but wasn’t. Here are the two items:

“Because of the parenting newsletters, I have changed the kind of clothing my child wears.”

“Because of the parenting newsletters, I changed how I wake my child in the morning.”

If a respondent reported (incorrectly) having learned about both of these topics in the newsletters, then we would strongly suspect that their answers to these *and all other questions* were biased by either response set or the social desirability bias, or by both biases.

In fact, only four respondents answered “yes” to both items, which suggests a low intrusion of these biases into our results. Their data was removed before the analyses were completed to increase the accuracy of our results.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence presented in this report, we advance the following conclusions:

1. Parents who responded to the survey found the newsletters useful. Over a third reported they read every article in every issue, and then kept and filed them. They found the newsletters almost as helpful as the information from doctors and nurses and other parents and more helpful than other sources of child-rearing advice we asked about, including other written materials, and the internet.
2. The newsletters were not only used by the initial parent (usually the mother), but were passed on to others as well. In more than one-half of households, an additional person (most often the child's father) regularly read the newsletter. The fact that parents would pass their newsletters along to others is confirmation that they find them useful. Multiple readership of each newsletter also argues for multiplication of effect, and cost efficiency of this method of parent education.
3. Parents reported that reading the newsletters led them to change their child-rearing behaviors in six key areas, each of which is predictive of child development gains. More importantly, the parents who most often reported behavior changes were those in greatest need: first-time parents. This suggests that the impact of the newsletters is greatest for those most in need of parenting advice.
4. Besides encouraging competent parenting, the newsletters may also be promoting children's self-reliance and healthy self-concept by convincing parents to involve children more in helping with chores. This may be especially true for first-time parents who report involving their children more in chores, after reading the newsletter, than experienced parents. First-time parents may be less aware of the benefits of participation in household tasks to children's growing independence and self-esteem because of their inexperience.

Recommendations

This instructional newsletter series is a universal program of parenting education for parents of young children in Fond du Lac County.

Based on these findings, we suggest that the effort of St. Agnes Hospital, the local Kiwanis clubs and UW Extension, Fond du Lac County to print and distribute the newsletters is well worth the effort. We recommend continuation of this program.

Certainly these closing comments shared by parents would echo this recommendation:

"I just want to thank you so much for the newsletters. I read them cover to cover. They were so very useful."

"Keep sending. They are great! Lots of useful information even for the 2nd and 3rd time moms to really remember and focus on the age appropriate activities and to prepare for what the next months will bring."

"Please keep on helping me and others with good information about children."

"Love the newsletter! Sometimes I learn new things; sometimes it's a pat on the back that I'm right on track. Love the part where it explains how the child thinks at their age level. I've read every one I've received. Thanks a lot!"

"I really like these parenting newsletters. They really help just to know what is right for his age group and what he is doing and how he is growing. Also they let you know how to keep your child safe from things. Thanks a lot for involving me in this survey!"

"I love the newsletter. I hope it continues."

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**Evaluation of the
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**A Report by University
of Wisconsin-Extension**



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