

Best Practices for Parent Education and Support Programs

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN – RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

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Why parent education?

Research strongly links both risk and protective factors for children and adolescents to the family environment.[1] Since parenting, in particular, shapes the quality of a child's development, parent education can be instrumental in supporting children's developmental outcomes and parents' well-being. [1,2,3,4] The National Parenting Education Network (NPEEN) describes the goal of parent education as "strengthening families by providing relevant, effective education and support and encouraging an optimal environment for the healthy growth and development of parents/caregivers and children." [5] Effective parent education programs have been linked with decreased rates of child abuse and neglect, better physical, cognitive and emotional development in children, increased parental knowledge of child development and parenting skills, improved parent-child communication, reduced youth substance abuse, and more effective parental monitoring and discipline. [2,3,6]

"Parent education strengthens families by providing relevant, effective education and support and encouraging an optimal environment for the healthy growth and development of parents/caregivers and children."

- National Parenting
Education Network
(NPEEN)

What is effective parent education?

Effective parent education programs come in many forms and can be found in many locations. Some effective parent education programs are universal - designed for any parent - while others are targeted to a specific population's needs. Parent education can be home-based, group-based, or even provided through newsletters or community services. Given the reported success of a wide variety of parent education programs, determining the best practices in parent education is a challenge. Though more experimental studies are needed to better understand the necessary elements of parent education programs, reviewing well-evaluated or evidence-based programs can illuminate many components of effective parent education programs. Evaluations of effective parent education programs typically describe population characteristics and assess program features and processes. [7] The best practices from these evaluations can be used to better understand and replicate successful programs.

Program Characteristics

Content and Curriculum

The literature on parenting education suggests that the most effective programs maintain a clear and consistent focus on parenting skills and developmental information. [7] Such programs work to strengthen family level protective factors through emphasizing family strengths such as spending time together and by building parents' skills in monitoring, communication and showing affection. [1,3,8,9] Programs that aim to reduce family level risk factors have also been shown to be effective. [1,10]

For example, these programs may have curricula that educate parents about how to decrease harsh and inconsistent parenting or try to make families less socially isolated. Though most successful programs are flexible and responsive to participant's expressed needs, programs need not reinvent the wheel. Evidence-based parent education programs whose curricula or programs can be purchased and/or replicated are available. (See the *Parent Education Curricula and Evaluation Resources* box at the end of this paper for links to several lists.) Despite the availability of strong evidence-based parent education programs, many communities continue to use popular but untested programs. [1,6] To maximize program effectiveness, following a tested and proven program design with fidelity is essential, because changing pieces of a curriculum can change the effect of a program. For instance, condensing an evidence-based program to a shorter time period or providing all the course materials at once in a mailing rather than at each class session as recommended is likely to undermine the effectiveness of a program. If an evidence-based parent education curriculum or program can be found that closely matches a community's needs, educators can implement the program with fidelity while additionally listening for and responding to unique participant needs.

Program Timing

The earlier in a family's development a program is delivered, the greater the chance it will be effective. Programs that work with parents of young children can help families avoid the later development of negative behaviors and set the stage for positive parent-child relationships in the future. [1,10] Programs targeted at different stages of family development, however, can also be efficacious. Programs that reach families during transitional times, such as birth and the first year of a child's life, beginning school or

the onset of puberty, are especially effective since parents are interested in acquiring the developmental knowledge necessary to deal with the “next step” in parenting. [8,9,10] Clustering parent education programs around these transitions, developmental stages or special needs of a child is powerful, because parents with children at the same stages have similar experiences. [1,9] For instance, parents with toddlers are likely to be excited and exasperated by communicating with their increasingly verbal child; while parents of teenagers may be struggling with establishing rules regarding how much time their teens spend with friends.

Program Delivery

While there are many ways to deliver parent education, perhaps the two most common forms are group-based parent education programs and home-based parent education programs. Both group-based and home-based parent education program delivery methods have been shown to improve parent and child outcomes. [7] The type of parent education delivery method used depends on participant needs and program goals. For instance, home visiting programs (one-on-one parent education approach) typically target families at risk for child maltreatment, poor health outcomes, and/or poor school readiness. [9] Alternatively, group-based parent education programs are often offered to a universal audience so they are less effective on the more problematic outcomes typically addressed in home-visiting programs; but group-based programs are often less expensive and have been shown to build parenting skills and support positive child behavior. [2] Some evaluations have shown the greatest success from programs that combine delivery methods and include both group-based education and home visits. [7]

Many effective programs also include both parents and children. [8,10] Programs for parents with young children may simply provide quality childcare while parents meet or offer opportunities for parents to practice new skills with their children, but programs serving families with older children may benefit from involving children and teens in the program. A parent and child centered program may have separate groups for parents and children that meet at the same time or have a parent discussion group preceded or followed by an activity for parents and children to do together.

Characteristics of Effective Parent Education Programs

- Focus on child development and parenting skills
- Reach families during times of transition
- Support the strengths of families
- Actively engage participants
- Maintain frequent and sustained contact with parents
- Contact families using multiple methods
- Catch families before problem behaviors begin
- Have well-trained, professional staff
- Hire warm, engaging and respectful staff
- Connect with other community organizations and resources
- Include parents AND children/teens
- Know population and meet participants' special needs

Teaching Method

The active engagement of parents has been shown to predict the magnitude of a parent education program's effect. [7] In other words, the more actively parents are engaged in applying what they are learning, the more the parents learn or grow from their involvement in the program. Interactive approaches such as role-playing and encouraging parents to practice skills with their children are examples of active learning and allow time for participants to practice their new knowledge and skills. [1,10]

Program Method

Additionally, frequent and sustained contact with parents has been shown to be important to successful programs. [7,9] Unfortunately, little information exists on precisely how often and for how long programs should meet. It is known that regular, repeated exposure to a concept or a skill helps parents integrate the skill into their everyday habits. [3] Programs that last over two years, however, have had trouble retaining participants. [3] A program meeting weekly for 3-6 months (12-24 sessions) may be reasonable for most groups. (Some funders will not even give grants to programs with less than 8 sessions. [9]) Higher risk families especially benefit from more frequent and sustained program contact. [10] Increasing program time allows families to develop trust and change dysfunctional attitudes or behaviors. Some scholars have suggested that high-risk families would ideally get 30-40 hours of program contact overall and receive multiple program contacts each week via class, a home visit, and/or newsletter. [1] However, the number of contact hours will probably depend on the level of risk and the problems faced by a family.

Staff

Research shows that professionals from many fields, including social work and nursing, have taught parent education with success. [3] Programs staffed with professionals are more effective than programs staffed by paraprofessionals. [3,7] Home visit programs have shown stronger effects when nurses implemented the program, because program participants viewed the nurse as an authority whose advice should be followed. [7] As a relatively new field, parent education does not have regulated standards for practitioner education. However, the National Parenting Education Network's (NPEN) website for professional development lists several degrees and certifications available to professionals wishing to hone their parent education skills and knowledge. Given the importance of staff to the success of parent education programs, investing in parent education training for both professional and paraprofessional staff can be important for program success. [7,11] Parent educators who appear credible to parents are better able to build rapport and have a greater impact when implementing the program.

Though staff credibility may in part be related to professional skills, characteristics such as warmth, genuineness, flexibility, humor, and empathy, communication skills, and sensitivity to family and group processes are highly related to the success of parenting education programs. [1, 3, 9, 11]

Ecological Perspective

Recent research has indicated that the culture and capacities of organizations can impact how well programs are implemented. [7] Effective programs usually take an ecological approach by considering all the influences (e.g., school, extended family, financial, work) on a family. [8,9] Some programs may reinforce and complement efforts already being made by other organizations, such as schools or faith communities. [9,10] For example, programs that pair a school-based component with a parenting program may have increased success because they support consistency between school and home. Similarly, the context of parenting programs can be expanded through collaboration with other community agencies. [8] Linking parents to other needed services can improve parenting programs and increase parental success.

Participant Characteristics

Effective programs recognize the special needs and cultural traditions of the families they serve and match materials and programs to the different needs of particular audiences. [1,3,10,12] Population characteristics such as race, income or education level are important to consider when selecting and implementing a parenting education program. [7] For instance, though research connects poverty with less responsive, warm parenting and decreased child well-being, programs targeting low-income families are unlikely to be successful if they first attempt to improve parenting skills; they must first help parents meet basic needs before parent education will be successful. [1] Participant characteristics may alter how a program is designed and implemented.

Culturally Adapted

Since the majority of parent education programs are intended for the mainstream U.S. culture, recruiting and retaining minority families in universal parent education programs is often a challenge. [12] Thus, culturally adapted programs that are tailored to the language, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and values of a group can increase program effectiveness with minority groups. [12] Effective culturally adapted parent education programs consider the following issues: 1) Is there a staff member who represents this cultural group?; 2) How do the values and parenting methods of this group differ from the mainstream values and parenting methods?; 3) Is extended family important to this group? Should they be included in the program?; and 4) How acculturated are these families? Are the parents less acculturated than the children? [1] Even if a program is unable to meet each of these criteria, such as hiring a staff member who represents a cultural group, consideration of the different aspects of cultural adaptation can increase the cultural sensitivity of an organization. Research findings are often used to adapt programs to different cultural groups; however, much of the research on minorities concerns low-income populations so the adaptations for middle or upper class minority families may be very different. [1] Several evaluations have shown that programs increased parent retention by 30-40% after switching to a culturally adapted program. [12] Since parents need to attend and return to a program to learn new behaviors, improved participant retention is necessary for success.

Parents of Adolescents

Parents of adolescents represent another important parent education population. Periods of transition, such as puberty, are times when interventions are most effective so parent education programs for parents of teenagers have great potential to see a measurable program impact. Parenting duties during the teen years can be summarized in five tasks: 1) love and connect, 2) monitor and observe, 3) guide and limit, 4) model and consult, and 5) provide and advocate. [13] The most consistently protective factor for adolescent development is a positive relationship with a parent. [1,13] Thus, parent education programs for parents with teenagers should aim to support a warm and communicative parent-child relationship. Developmentally, many teenagers have not developed the capacity to make responsible decisions so teenagers often engage in risky behaviors. [1] Interventions are unlikely to train teenagers to stop these risky behaviors until their brains are more fully developed. However, parent education programs can work with parents to develop methods for limiting teenager's opportunities for risky behavior. [1,13] Finally, parent education programs for parents with teenagers can help parents and teens transition into the teen's growing need to spend more time with peers. [1]

Summary

When carefully examined, the key components of well-evaluated or evidence-based programs can serve as guidelines for the creation, implementation and evaluation of quality parent education programs. Programs adhering to the best practices in parent education

Parent Education Curricula and Evaluation Resources

What Works, Wisconsin Evidence-based Parenting Program Directory

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/families/whatworks.cfm>

University of Minnesota Supplemental Resource (with Curricula Suggestions)

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/CI/Programs/FYC/parent-framework.html>

Cornell's Parenting in Context Evaluation Guide www.parenting.cit.cornell.edu

National Parenting Education Network's Evaluation Guide www.npen.org

Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund Program Impact and Evaluation Materials

<http://wctf.state.wi.us/home/FRCEval.htm>

programs will carefully consider both program and participant characteristics. By following these best practices in parent education programs, practitioners can increase their chances of delivering programs that will strengthen parenting and enhance the well-being of children.

Well designed programs that are implemented by caring and knowledgeable staff can have positive short- and long-term impacts on the quality of parent-child relationships and children's development.

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