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Reaching and Teaching Parents of Teens: Which Delivery Method Is Best?



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Do we know the best way to reach and teach parents? Does the research literature suggest one way of reaching parents that is more effective and efficient than all others? In short, is there a "one-size-fits-all" method for delivering parent education that would guarantee the most bang for our buck?

The short answer is "no". The optimum program delivery method helps parent educators reach their stated goals with the resources available, and different goals may allow for different methods. For example, if the goal is to teach one concept such as local norms or beliefs about curfews and drinking, then public education through the media may be the most efficient and cost-effective strategy. If, on the other hand, the goal is to teach a skill, like child guidance and discipline or communication skills, then a series of many workshop sessions will surely be needed. If the goal is something more difficult, like decreasing child abuse in a highly stressed family, then an even more intensive method may be required.

In this paper, we will try to provide some general guidance to those who design parenting education programs. We will do this in two parts. First, we will describe eight characteristics that are common to effective parenting programs. Then we will discuss six parenting education delivery methods, ranging from mass media to workshop series to resource centers, and the potential of each method.

Characteristics of Effective Parenting Programs

We know parenting programs can be effective. We all know of specific programs which have done much good for the participants. But we also know of programs which have the reputation of being fairly ineffective. Usually this reputation is based upon informal opinion in the community. But we also have rigorous evaluations of many parenting programs, some of which show solid results, and some of which don't. If we look across these many evaluations, we should be able to spot some patterns that help us understand why some programs are so much more effective than others. That is exactly what we have done. From the research literature, we have tried to extract the general principles that distinguish the most successful parenting programs.

1. **Successful programs are ecological.** Rather than focussing exclusively on just one aspect of the issue, typically the parent's personality or behavior, the most successful programs affect the systems surrounding

the parent and child as well. For example, they may link the parent to continuing sources of social support and advice by changing neighboring patterns, by instituting parent discussion groups or connecting parents to formal services where needed. As in other domains of prevention and behavior change, the evidence from Parenting programs shows that it is usually fruitless to try to change an individual without simultaneously changing the environment to which the individual is adapted.

2. **The most successful programs are often collaborations.** This follows from the first principle: since most organizations can respond to only part of the ecology of parenting, ecological programs also always require the collaboration of community groups. This will certainly be true of UW-Extension too: we can't do it all ourselves. We should avoid duplicating the efforts and expertise of others, and collaborate with them instead.
3. **Successful programs are long-term.** There is no evidence that one-shot workshops with parents have much lasting effect. The Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund, for example, has a policy of not even giving grants to child abuse workshops that last for fewer than 8 sessions.
4. **Successful programs have terrific staff.** One review of 48 parent education program evaluations found that who led the workshops was more important than the specific curriculum used.
5. **Successful programs tend to be targeted.** They do not try to make everything better. They have clear goals, focussing on something specific like preventing child abuse, or getting parents to talk with their teens about sex. They are also targeted by age, since advice to parents of teens and infants must be so different.

As an example, Extension conducted two programs in the last two years in which professors from Madison were linked by live TV with parent groups meeting in each county. These educational programs were called "Raising Responsible Teens." In the first try at this, we aimed at the whole age range of adolescence and at several topics, ranging from teen sexuality to drug use to depression and suicide. The following year, when we tried this program again, we targeted it much more specifically: The age range we dealt with was limited to early adolescence (age 10-14), and the content was limited just to teen sexuality. The second program was much more successful than the first, and we think part of the reason was the way we targeted it more specifically. The parents in the local groups had more in common with each other, had come for very similar reasons, and learned a lot more from each other, because of the targeting.

6. **Successful programs tend to be adapted to a specific audience, especially to subculture and family structure.** Like the natural ecology, social ecologies also vary. We cannot assume (as we once did) that causal processes will remain constant across changes in ecological habitat, whether that ecology is defined in the natural or social world. For

example, an authoritarian parenting style is related to better school grades for Asian-American youth, but lower grades for most other American groups. Another example: encouraging parent-child conversation (especially elaborated and responsive language) in the early childhood years makes good sense in most American groups, since it predicts later literacy and success in school. But it makes little sense among most Native Americans, for whom a talkative child is a cultural anomaly. Therefore, we must always adapt our parenting education efforts to the cultural needs of the audience, not just to be polite, but also in order to be effective in our efforts.

In some cases, we also need to adapt our educational materials to fit specific **family structures**. The "new demography" of the American family shows a varied set of arrangements, including prominently single-parent households, blended families, and 2-earner families. Each occupies a different niche in the social ecology, with its own opportunities and constraints, and programs for each type will often differ. For example, the two years of parent-child relations following a divorce follow a course very different from parent-child relations in intact families, and the research literature allows us to make highly specific and useful suggestions to parents in that family structure.

7. **Successful programs intervene at critical periods** in the family life course. This means they intervene to prevent problems before they are well established, and they intervene at family transition points when parents are most receptive to learning. We believe that Extension's very successful newsletter series, Parenting the First Year, is so effective in part because new parents are especially receptive to advice. Another example: Our Extension office in Eagle River has piloted a workshop series for divorcing parents, on how to help their children through the transition. The series has had terrific attendance and a very positive reception, at least in part, because this is another critical period in the family life course, when parents feel extra concerned about the impact of their own behavior upon their children.
8. **Successful programs build on parents' existing strengths**, rather than focussing on their weaknesses. This is really true of all behavior change. Focussing on deficits makes people feel incapable and defensive, and when people feel that way they are less likely to take the chance to experiment with new ideas or skills. All people have strengths and abilities, and most positive behavior change will come about by building upon and from those abilities.

Here is one example. When a program of parenting support called Family Matters was first begun, the parent educators did not begin by giving advice to the parents. They recruited parents of 3-year-olds for their program by walking door to door and talking to people, and they told the parents they met that they wanted to learn from parents in that neighborhood what "worked well for them" in raising their children. They

said that they believed every parent was an expert on their own child, and then asked the parent to tell them what things they did with their child that seemed to work well. The parent educators took notes on what they heard, and produced a newsletter of advice. Then they went back to those homes and showed each parent their advice in the newsletter, how they had helped others learn to be better parents. The parents were really impressed. This was concrete evidence that the educators really respected the fact that the parent had some competence. It was easy, after that, to get parents to come out to the parenting discussion groups.

9. **Successful programs allow for individual differences.** The best advice is best only in a probabilistic sense: it will not work for every parent in all circumstances. The best programs are not rigidly dogmatic. Rather, they are tolerant in allowing differences, and in recognizing the parent as the final authority in deciding which advice fits best.

That completes the list of characteristics of effective parenting programs. Now we will turn to a consideration of the delivery methods available to us. These six methods are by no means exhaustive. Each may have a role to play, depending upon the needs of the community.

Delivery Methods for Parenting Education in the Teen Years

Media Approaches

Key Characteristics

Media approaches such as newspapers, radio, and television are attractive because parent educators can reach large audiences at low or minimal cost; local media, in particular, are apt to provide free space or air time for parent education which is often viewed as part of their public service programming requirements. Similarly, media require little time investment on the part of busy parents since they can be accessed during convenient times in familiar settings.

Media can be used to inform parents of emerging youth problems and the role that effective parenting can play, thus generating interest in some of the other parenting education opportunities that may be available in the community.

Consequences

The success of a parenting program depends, in part, upon the ability to provide information to parents when they need it and are most ready to act upon it. Media is directed to a mass audience, thus making it more difficult to target the content to a specific group such as single parents or parents of early adolescents.

If the programming goal is to encourage parents to adopt new parenting practices, this method may not be intensive enough. Extension's experience in satellite TV programming suggests that media can be more effective if supplemented with local groups such as a Parents Anonymous Chapter, a parent network group that meets regularly to discuss child guidance and discipline, or a group that you would form specifically to supplement your media efforts. Thus, a mass media approach can not only teach, but also recruit parents into more intensive programs.

Print media is generally more effective with more educated audiences while broadcast media appeals to the less educated as well.

Parent Newsletters

Key Contributions

Newsletters are newsy, informal letters written to a clearly identified audience. Newsletters are attractive because parent educators can target a specific audience and provide relevant information at the time it is most likely to be used. Newsletters can reach parents during "critical periods" when they are receptive to learning and when their parenting practices may not yet be well-established, and thus, more easily changed. They can also reach parents who are social isolates not likely to attend a meeting or workshop.

For example, Extension's "Parenting the First Year" newsletter series provides a newsletter once a month during the baby's first year of life; each issue is geared to a specific month in a baby's first year and reaches parents when they are most ready to use it and have the greatest motivation to learn. A recent study provides strong evidence that the newsletter prevented half a million instances of physical punishment among Wisconsin babies in 1991; on average, the newsletter prevented 26 slaps or spanks per family. Furthermore, the newsletter provided the greatest benefit to those parents at highest risk of child abuse--single parents, teens, and families facing the stress of limited income, low education or social isolation. Extension has been able to document this impressive impact at a cost of less than \$5 per family.

Newsletters can gain a reputation as being trustworthy in a couple different ways. Sometimes this trust is built because the writer is a recognized authority or the writer carefully includes only tested, reliable information. Sometimes this trust is built because the audience has a personal relationship with the writer or a feeling of being close to the writer and other readers. For example, a newsletter coming from people that live and work in the community may have more credibility locally than a newsletter written by an expert miles away. A newsletter reporting the results of a local needs assessment is likely to be more believed, and have greater impact, than one reporting national survey results.

Consequences

Newsletters are no more effective than the mailing list, so it is essential to be able to identify the target audience. The teen years may be another "critical period" when parents are receptive to new learning. Parents of teenagers, however, may not be specific enough; parents of early adolescents (ages 10 to 13) have different needs and concerns than parents of middle adolescents (ages 14 to 17) or parents of late adolescents (18 to 21). If, for example, your goal is helping parents delay initiation into alcohol use, which parents would you focus on?

Newsletters are unlikely to break the social isolation of parenting. Newsletters can, however, encourage contact with other learners, and call other learning opportunities to the reader's attention.

Merging Parent Education Into Existing Programs or Organizations

Key Characteristics

This model builds on the insight that it is easier to modify the use of an existing program or setting than to establish a new program or a new setting. According to this delivery model, parent educators would use any setting that gathers parents together for any reason--lunchtime at the factory, open house night at school, or orientation night for parents of athletes. Thus, the parent educator spends less time and effort on promotion, yet often reaches large numbers of parents, including the hard-to-reach learner who shies away from more traditional parent education opportunities.

Parent educators can adapt existing teaching materials and video tapes to this single-concept, brief workshop experience; furthermore, these brief exposures can serve as a "commercial" to spark interest in more intensive parent education opportunities in the community.

Consequences

Incorporating parent education into a program or organization whose primary purpose is something else imposes severe time constraints and limits this method to single concept teaching; the reasonably well-functioning family may benefit from single concepts more than families with intensive needs. Since the audience has assembled for another purpose, it is harder to tailor the program to the specific needs of the parent. Thus, this method is often less beneficial for parents with special needs (i.e. single parents, families experiencing divorce or remarriage, or minority families).

Parenting Series

Key Characteristics

Successful parenting programs are long-term. The Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund, for example, has a policy of not even funding child abuse workshops that last for fewer than 8 sessions.

One advantage of a workshop series is the availability of planned workshop materials and leader instructions. These do not diminish the need for a skilled leader, but they provide a structure and curriculum that can be very useful. Some of the parenting workshop programs for sale or rent have been evaluated and show some degree of effectiveness.

Not only do successful parenting programs change parents' behavior, often times they also change the conditions that surround the parent. Parents in these classes sometimes continue to meet after the formal program comes to an end, providing a continuing source of social support and advice. Regardless of culture and social class, a mother is warmer and more emotionally stable when there are more adults around to help.

Furthermore, when a core group of parents in a community become connected to each other through gatherings such as a parenting series, they are apt to talk to each other about issues such as curfews, drinking, and age of first dating. These discussions can be instrumental in establishing community norms around these issues. Parents can rely on these norms, if they so choose, which can make the job of parenting easier. Furthermore, youth are more apt to respond to societal expectations if the expectations are clear and consistent.

Consequences

Despite their effectiveness, busy parents may be reluctant to sign up for a series of parenting meetings. Furthermore, if the program is targeted to parents of a specific age group, it may be difficult to enroll enough parents to allow for the discussion and interchange that contribute to an effective program.

Parent Support Groups

Key Characteristics

Parent support groups build on the idea that parents function better when they belong to a supportive community or have some source of social support. In today's society, all too often, family members live miles away, residents have little connection to others in the neighborhood, and parents don't talk to each other. Support groups are parents who come together because they want mutual support and learning. Support groups may meet weekly or monthly to discuss parenting concerns, report on successes, and get ideas from others on how to do

things better (Clarke, 1978). Support groups can "energize, stimulate, motivate, and comfort" (Twarogowski, 1987). While support groups may come in many shapes and sizes, they generally range from 2 to 20 people.

Consequences

While support groups usually start with lots of enthusiasm, oftentimes they are hard to maintain. Some of the pitfalls are monthly meetings becoming merely bull-sessions or opportunities for members to socialize or complain (Twarogowski, 1984). The group may rely only on a few of its members for new ideas and leadership rather than each member sharing in the responsibilities of facilitator, program coordinator, and host. Sometimes subgroups can form which interfere with the growth of the larger group (Twarogowski, 1984). Another pitfall may be the behaviors of group members such as people who dominate the conversation, try to impose their ideas on others, gossip outside the group, put down others, or are unwilling to ask for what they need from the group (Twarogowski, 1984).

Support groups may be most beneficial if they focus on parents of a child at a particular age. In rural communities, it may be difficult to recruit enough parents of a target age such as early adolescents, for example. Furthermore, if attendance varies, much of the value of a support group may be lost.

Family Resource Centers

Key Characteristics

Family Resource Centers function as an umbrella for a wide variety of parenting education delivery methods including home visitation, group parent education and support, resources and referral, special family events, warm lines, and newsletters. The goal is to serve all families, not just high risk families, through primary prevention. Programs are provided free which allows them to reach out to all families in a non-stigmatizing way. Since parents are involved in the planning and development of the centers, the program is highly flexible and can be adapted to meet the unique needs of the community.

Consequences

Family Resource Centers require base funding of about \$75,000 per year to be fully operational; in most cases, extensive fund raising is required to support the initial costs of establishing the center and ongoing costs of child care and transportation for parents. If funding is not available, another community group, such as the Youth Futures Parent Education Subcommittee, could purchase materials for local use and provide them at easily accessible locations such as the library or the local video store.

Summary

The best program delivery method helps parent educators reach their stated goals with the resources available. For individuals or organizations who are just beginning to provide parent education, however, the best strategy may be selecting one delivery method to begin with that provides a high probability of success.

Studies of adult learners suggest that parents are not a uniform group; parents are as different in their interests and their learning preferences as children. The best parenting program delivery method may be a comprehensive approach that encompasses a variety of methods and incorporates those characteristics that we know contribute to effective parenting program; furthermore the most successful programs will not focus exclusively on just one aspect of the issue, such as the parents' personality or behavior, but also will attempt to affect the systems surrounding the parents and child as well. Since most organizations can respond to only part of the ecology of parenting, the most successful programs often require collaboration with other community groups.

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