

PROMOTING POSITIVE PARENTING PRACTICES THROUGH PARENTING EDUCATION

Marlene Zepeda, Frances Varela, Alex Morales

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Overview

The family is the crucible of a young child's development. The 2000 Institute of Medicine report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* shows that positive developmental interactions with parents improve young children's social competence and their overall capacity to learn. Fifty-four percent of parents want more information on how they can help their young child learn. The MCHB State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (SECCS) Initiative includes parenting education as one of five essential components. Parenting education is critical because of: (1) the impact of parent-child interactions on developmental outcomes; and (2) the opportunity that parenting education provides for optimizing what parents do with their children.

Demands on parents are changing. With current rates of workforce participation, 60 percent of parents (including 74% of fathers) wish they had more time with their young children, and family mobility is changing the source of parenting "know-how" from extended family to media.

Family patterns that influence child developmental outcomes include: parent-child interactions and activities; organized child experiences, such as early care and education selection and children's social networks; and health behaviors and safety measures.

With proper support, parents can alter these patterns to produce healthier outcomes. Parenting education is intended to: (1) strengthen parent knowledge about how their actions affect child development; and (2) give parents skills to help their child's healthy development and school readiness. Yet few resources are universally available to parents. Publicly funded resources are often directed to families with severe discord and functioning problems. This excludes many parents who could benefit from parenting education.

State strategies to increase resources include: mapping available resources; filling gaps in current service delivery; connecting existing and new services; connecting families with services; and increasing the quality of parenting education.

Definitions of Parenting Education and Support

Parenting education is closely linked to parenting support. However, both help parents improve their competency and confidence. *Parenting education* is the provision of specific knowledge and child-rearing skills to parents and other caregivers (Mahoney et al., 1999), with the objective of enhancing a child's health and development. The goal of *parenting support* is to help parents or primary caregivers develop and utilize available psychological and material resources to help their families and themselves.

What Is the Need for Parenting Education?

Parents could do much more to promote their child's development. For example, only 52 percent read with their child daily. Nearly all parents recognize the importance of early childhood and want to learn more about parenting techniques that promote development. While about two thirds say they would pay more for pediatric provider counseling or other educational services, only one third have attended groups or classes. Higher-income families have access to information, but parents from lower SES households report few accessible resources.

Groups of Parents Needing Enhanced Support

- *Parents of children with special health care needs (CSHCN)*: Parents caring for a developmentally delayed or disabled child may feel isolated and have difficulty managing behavior arising from the



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disability or medical problem.

- **Teen parents:** Teens need extra support and education to be able to provide a positive environment in which their infants and children can thrive and develop. They may be struggling to complete their basic education, hold a job, and parent a child. Often they have little support.
- **Grandparents:** About 4.5 million children live in grandparent-headed households, including 13 percent of African-American and eight percent of Hispanic children. The rate increased 30 percent between 1990 and 2000. These children are disproportionately affected by substance abuse and family discord. About 30 percent are under age five.
- **Foster parents:** Foster children with behavioral problems rely on systems of care that are under-resourced and poorly coordinated. Foster parents can benefit from parenting education and support.
- **Fathers:** Although fathers are primary caregivers for 18 percent of children under age five, programs frequently target women as caregivers. The increasing number of parent education and support efforts acknowledging the critical role of fathers helps them become actively involved in nurturing and educating their children.

Who Provides Parenting Education?

No single agency coordinates or is fully responsible for public parenting education resources. Parenting education comes from health, education, and social service sectors. The content and intensity varies by provider and program. Examples include:

- **Pediatric providers:** Professional standards call for counseling on topics including safety measures, importance of reading, and strategies for guidance and discipline. Many parents expect little counseling on child development and have not received advice on these essential topics.
- **Early intervention and Head Start:** These programs usually include parenting education as part of the curriculum, focused on improving positive parent-child interaction and promoting child learning.
- **Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Food Program (WIC):** WIC provides educational modules on topics such as child safety, in addition to nutrition.
- Other examples of community resources include home visiting and family resource centers.

How Can SECCS Improve Parenting Education Resources?

Show leadership and build partnerships by establishing a multi-sector coalition to identify strengths, needs, and priorities. Include parents, providers, funders, state agencies, health plans, community colleges, and large school district adult education programs.

Create a strategic plan that focuses on coordinating existing services, increasing the use of childhood development in adult literacy and education programs, establishing standards for content and quality, increasing capacity, and training parenting educators.

Improve the financing of parent education services by mapping the existing use of funds, optimizing the efficiency of existing programs, maximizing public revenue, building flexibility in categorical funds, establishing public-private partnerships, and using integrated, comprehensive service delivery platforms.

Capitalize on existing platforms that parents of young children trust and use. Parenting education can be added to or expanded in early care and education, adult literacy programs, family resource centers, and pediatric offices.

Set standards and performance measures for education and service delivery that build from existing models, including the Cooperative Extension Parenting Education Model, NAEYC Accreditation Standards, and the Early Head Start Standards.

Use professional marketing strategies to conduct targeted or broad-based education campaigns. Involve private sector marketers and makers of child/parent-oriented products in partnerships to promote positive parenting practices.

Enhance the capacities of parenting education programs by making curricula readily available to community-based programs and providing technical assistance to community-based programs and staff.

Enhance the capacity of the workforce by establishing licensure programs, encouraging professional development, mentoring, and sharing resources.

Increase counseling from pediatric offices by providing quality improvement resources, working with insurers and health plans to fund ancillary education (e.g., the Healthy Steps model), and connecting practices to community resources.

Strengthen the capacity of the community by encouraging local-level planning. Promote the coordination of parenting education by multiple local-level service providers

Marlene Zepeda, PhD is associate professor at the Department of Child and Family Studies at California State University, Los Angeles. Frances Varela, RN, MSN, MALAS is a private consultant with Varela Group Consulting. Alex Morales, LCSW is executive director of the Children's Bureau of Southern California.

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