

# Best Practices in Parenting Education

## *PROCESS*

by Rachel A. Ozretich, M.S., Certified Family Life Educator  
Parent Education Coordinator, Family and Community Development  
Oregon State University Extension Service, Corvallis, OR 97331-5106

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### Why best practices?

Parenting education classes abound, and it is not uncommon to encounter instructors who have no parenting education training. Some instructors have training in a specific curriculum, but may feel that they would like more preparation. When parenting educators are poorly prepared, they may inadvertently engage in practices that reduce the potential positive effects of the program. While few training programs for parenting educators are available, certification programs for parenting and family life educators are being developed.<sup>1</sup>

Quality parenting education is a powerful resource for families, empowering parents to enhance their children's development and build strong developmental assets in their lives. Poor quality parenting education can have the opposite effect. Parenting educators often are trusted by parents to know the "right way" to rear children and to give good parenting advice. Many different curricula are available, some with a strong research base and others based simply on the authors' opinions. The quality of these curricula and the parenting advice found in them varies widely. When poor advice is accepted and used by parents, children and families may be negatively affected for years to come. It is time to focus more actively on characteristics of quality in parenting education programs.

Quality includes both *program content* and *instructional process*. Often, best practices refers to specific programs with demonstrated effectiveness. In this paper, however, best practices in parenting education *process* is the focus, rather than curriculum content or program structure. Best practices are based on a wellness perspective and a parent empowerment philosophy. A basic level of parental well-being and competence is assumed. When this

assumption is invalid due to temporary or long-term family stresses, such as homelessness, parental substance abuse or domestic violence, appropriate referrals to specialized services in the community must be made. Such family support practices are an essential correlate of parenting education, and most of the literature on *process* quality is focused on both family support and parenting education.

This paper summarizes the research and professional literature on recommended principles and practices in parenting education and family support. Based on this literature, specific implications for the role and responsibilities of the parenting educator are described.

### Characteristics of quality in parenting education

High quality parenting education and family support programs share a number of important characteristics.<sup>2</sup> These include:

- a prevention (rather than remediation) orientation, facilitating parental effectiveness
- a focus on the importance of the parent's role as nurturer and first teacher
- a belief in the capacity for parental growth and development, and a recognition that this is a continuous process over time
- a dedication to building on family strengths
- a belief that parental self-esteem and confidence enhance parental effectiveness
- a provision for parental input and decision-making in the program
- flexibility in program planning, with responsiveness to participants' needs and preferences
- valuing of the importance of informal social support networks for families

- a dedication to serve families of all socioeconomic, ethnic, and structural circumstances
- a community (ecological) orientation, with efforts to connect families to available resources and support

The National Extension Parent Education Model lists nine important assumptions about parents and their relationships with children (see box below)<sup>3</sup> and lists many delivery strategies, from tabletop messages to parenting education resource centers. Best practices should inform all of these delivery strategies. Perhaps the best known summary of best practices is the list of principles developed by the Family Resource Coalition of America (see box, p. 3).<sup>4</sup>

## Parents' expertise

Effective parenting education programs incorporate co-ownership of program content and processes with the families they serve.<sup>5</sup> Parents are seen as partners, specialists about their own children, needs, and preferences.<sup>6</sup> Input and feedback are actively obtained from parents at regular intervals and the content of this input addressed within the program in appropriate and timely ways. Governing boards and advisory groups include significant numbers of parents who have previously, or are concurrently, being served by the program. All written materials, verbal and

behavioral interchanges recognize the strengths and expertise possessed by individual parents, especially with regard to their own children, experiences, and ideas, while at the same time valuing the knowledge and skills parents may gain from the program.<sup>7</sup>

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*Mutuality and respect should be the cornerstone of all program and participant interactions and communications.*

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## The learning process

Effective parenting education programs recognize the slow nature of personal growth and behavioral changes. Parenting is recognized as an ongoing growth process.<sup>8</sup> Effective programs are process-oriented and participant-centered, provide opportunities for social interaction and for practicing new skills in supportive environments, and use peers as instructors or tutors when possible. Successful programs include an emphasis on interaction between parents, as well as between parents and the instructor. The more control parents perceive they have in programs, the more highly they rate the effectiveness of these programs.<sup>9</sup>

### Assumptions of the National Extension Parent Education Model

- Parents are primary socializers of their children.
- Parenting attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors can be positively influenced by parent education efforts.
- Parenting is a learned skill that can be strengthened through study and experience.
- Parent education is more effective when parents are active participants in and contributors to their parent education programs.
- The parent-child relationship is nested within and influenced by multiple social and cultural systems.
- Programs should be responsive to diversity among parents.
- Effective parent education may be accomplished by a variety of methods.
- Both the parent and the child have needs that should be met.
- The goal of parent education is strengthening and educating the parent (or caregiver) so that he or she is better able to facilitate the development of caring, competent, and healthy children.

Programs that are comprehensive, involve more than one member of the family, include experiences for both parents and children, and that extend for periods of several years or more tend to show the greatest long-term benefits for children.<sup>10</sup>

Parents learn best when program content is relevant to their current needs and experiences. Regular program evaluation, needs assessments, and participant feedback help program staff tailor content to group strengths and cultural values.<sup>11</sup>

Effective programs are responsive to and respectful of the cultural and social characteristics of the families and communities they serve. Programs are more successful when they understand, respect, and affirm the cultural values and approaches of participating families and integrate these into program content and processes.<sup>12</sup> Supporting a multicultural approach for families, where the most desirable characteristics of American culture are combined with those of the family's native culture is a recommended approach.

## The parenting educator's role

Effective parenting education instructors are well trained, experienced at working with children and parents, and supportive of program goals. Instructors should have strong facilitation and communication skills, and be:<sup>13</sup>

- warm and accepting toward both parents and children
- sensitive to individual needs and concerns
- knowledgeable about community cultural and child-rearing values
- willing to share classroom or program management with participants
- trained (or receiving training) in parenting education processes and approaches

Parenting educators need to communicate a sense of valuing the parent's skills and special qualities, and confidence in parental capacity to solve problems independently.<sup>14</sup> Effective instructors:<sup>15</sup>

- are able to describe and model positive parenting skills

## Principles of Family Support Practice

1. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
2. Staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members – adults, youth, and children.
3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
4. Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

- view themselves as facilitators of learning rather than experts who know all of the answers
- trust that participants (both parents and children) will learn from each other as well as from program curriculum

Best practices as described in this document have implications for the responsibilities of parenting educators. The following description of some of these responsibilities is most applicable to group learning processes, but should inform other delivery strategies as well.

## Responsibilities of parenting educators

*Establish and maintain a safe and respectful environment.* It isn't easy for many parents to attend a parenting workshop or program. Especially for those who have had few positive experiences with education, or who worry about their competence as a parent, interaction with a parenting educator or a parenting group

environment can feel threatening. Furthermore, groups without positive guidance can get into unhealthy exchanges between participants, especially when the topic is as emotionally significant as parenting. Parents have much information, ideas, and support to offer each other. Parenting educators must establish a safe environment for families to learn and share ideas without fear of embarrassment or ridicule, and maintain this environment for the duration of the program. This should start with the first parent meeting or other first contact with families.

Some instructors prefer introducing a list of ground rules for group interactions.<sup>16</sup> Others emphasize respectful philosophies or program premises. Introductions are a good time to describe the program goals and philosophies that value the expertise each parent brings, the fact that every family is unique, and that there are many different positive ways to parent. Establishing a respect for different approaches to parenting, as well as existing research-based knowledge about child development and successful child-rearing techniques, helps parents start out feeling valued as well as excited about what they will be learning. The parenting educator can also refer back to this introduction as needed to remind the group about the importance of respecting each participant's individual parenting approaches.

In many states, parenting educators are mandated reporters of suspected child abuse. For ethical reasons, this should be made clear in a matter-of-fact manner within the introduction to every program where parents will be encouraged to share their ideas and experiences.<sup>17</sup>

The parenting educator needs to steer away from teaching methods that tend to embarrass parents. For example, some parents don't read well, so parents should be asked to volunteer for activities that involve oral reading. Active listening and affirming positive aspects of parent's ideas (even when this is difficult) help maintain an atmosphere of emotional safety and mutual respect.

#### Match process and content to parent needs.

We must consider who program participants are, how they are most likely to engage in the learning process, and what their own preferences and goals are for program content and process. Many

parenting education books, curricula and strategies are designed for middle class, well-educated families. These are less accessible or useful for parents of different educational, cultural, family structure, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Identity of participants should be taken into account in all program planning and curriculum materials.

Furthermore, parents often come with an agenda in mind. Asking participants what they are interested in learning more about is an essential part of matching content to parent needs, and should be done early in the program, and regularly in a multi-session program. Even in a one-time workshop, participants can be asked what issues they especially want addressed.

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*When provided with high quality information, most parents are competent to make good choices for their families.*

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#### Introduce helpful information and concepts.

An integral part of parenting education delivery is the presentation of helpful information and concepts. In parenting classes this is done both formally as a short presentation or handout, and informally through discussion and activities. If a parenting curriculum is being used, this will supply the formal presentation of information. Otherwise, many parenting educators will present information or ideas from books or other sources. Parenting educators should remember that they don't have enough information to tell a parent what specific parenting behaviors will work for that parent's family. Each family has a unique set of values, skills, and challenges. When provided with high quality information, most parents are competent to make good choices for their families.

Use diverse teaching methods. Because parents have diverse learning styles, strengths and preferences, using a variety of teaching methods is recommended. Within the limits of program structure, the use of videotape presentations or modeling, brainstorming, pros and cons discussions, small group activities, ice-breakers,

games, arts and crafts projects, guided role plays, demonstrations, etc. is recommended.

Maintain positive balance in content. When offered opportunities to share ideas with each other, both positive and negative ideas will often arise. It isn't easy for parenting educators to maintain an atmosphere of respect and acceptance when a parent recommends an idea that is clearly counterproductive, and maybe even abusive to a child. Affirming positive aspects of parent's ideas (even when they are difficult to find) while at the same time offering alternative strategies is one effective technique.

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*Negative ideas must always be balanced by more positive ones from the instructor.*

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Often, another parent will do this, but the parenting educator has a responsibility to maintain a positive balance in content by countering any negative or counterproductive idea before the end of the session if at all possible. To fail to do so may imply a tacit agreement with the idea.

Facilitate the building of supportive peer relationships. Because parents learn so effectively from each other, and benefit greatly from the respect and social support of the parent group, the parenting educator has a responsibility to facilitate this process. Helping parents learn each other's names is an important first step. Including activities that help parents get to know each other is also essential. Appropriate strategies depend on program structure and duration.

Gather mid-point feedback and respond appropriately. Program evaluation is always necessary, but mid-point feedback helps improve program delivery while the participants can still benefit from it. It is a powerful way of affirming shared management of the program with parents. This is often done with a brief confidential survey, varying from a blank sheet for comments to a two page questionnaire. The focus is on gathering qualitative information from the participants about how they are feeling about the program and how it

might be improved. The information gathered can then be summarized and shared with the participants. If it appears that some change in the program is called for, the participants can help make that decision. The parenting educator is always responsible for keeping program policies and activities within the bounds of professional ethics and appropriate practices.

Remember the long-term nature of personal growth and behavioral change. It's not easy for people to change their thinking and behavior patterns. Once knowledge is gained, it takes time to remember it outside of the learning environment, to decide it might be useful, to remember it during the heat of the moment, to let it inform an action plan, and then for parents to rely on it and take that action. Awareness of this fact can alleviate at least some of the frustration often felt by both parents and instructors.

Provide access to information about community resources. Make referrals when appropriate. All families deserve to have access to information about community resources for families. Families must have their basic needs met before they can focus effectively on improving parenting skills.<sup>18</sup> Effective programs establish continuing connections with community organizations, employers, and schools for the purposes of collaboration and continuity of support for families and children.<sup>19</sup>

Self-care and boundary maintenance for parenting educators. Within each program, the structure for supporting parents is set by policy. Parenting educators often see parents who have great need of a friend, confidant, or counselor and are tempted to fill that need for parents. It is important to make thoughtful decisions about appropriate boundaries between parenting educator and program participant. Deciding when to make a referral for parents who need more than the parenting educator can provide is difficult but essential for the well-being of both.

Many parenting educators work by themselves in small programs or isolated areas. Meeting regularly with a mentor or other parenting educators for the purposes of collaboration and mutual support not only enhances skills, but is also an essential safeguard against burnout.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Certified Family Life Educator Program, National Council on Family Relations, 3989 Central Ave. N.E., Suite 550, Minneapolis, MN 55421
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- <sup>4</sup> Family Resource Coalition. (1996). Guidelines for family support practice. Address: 200 South Michigan Avenue, 16<sup>th</sup> Floor, Chicago, IL 60604, phone (312)341-0900.
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