

What research tells us about effective parenting education programs

A WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN FACT SHEET

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Program Design and Content

- ◆ **Bolster family level protective factors** – Programs that build knowledge and skills in parental monitoring, communication, support, showing affection, spending time together, and discipline are linked to healthy youth development.
 - ◆ **Reduce family level risk factors** – Many effective programs aim to reduce or eliminate harsh or overly strict parenting, parenting that is inconsistent or too permissive, social isolation, and high levels of marital or family conflict.
 - ◆ **Involve both parents and children** – Family-focused programs are often more effective than child- or parent-only approaches. Several particularly successful programs utilize simultaneous parent-only and youth-only sessions followed by family sessions with opportunities to practice new skills.
 - ◆ **Incorporate adequate time and opportunity for participants to practice new skills and thinking patterns** – Effective programs provide pertinent information and then provide opportunities for parents to practice their new knowledge and skills through activities such as role-playing with other adults or with their children.
 - ◆ **More intensive for families with a higher number of risks** – For higher risk families, more time is needed to develop trust, modify dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors, and to build upon skills learned in prior sessions. It is advised that programs with high-risk parents include at least 30-40 contact hours for positive impacts and include multiple contacts each week (class, home visit, newsletter, phone call, etc.).
 - ◆ **Collaborate with other community agencies to provide a comprehensive array of supports to meet the multiple needs of families** – Parental functioning can be enhanced by linking parents to needed services that address factors such as substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, employment, child care, nutrition and housing.
 - ◆ **Reinforce and complement other educational efforts in schools, faith communities, media and community institutions** – For example, some programs pair a school-based component with a parent skill-building component. Such an approach helps ensure consistency between home and school.
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Program Relevance

- ◆ **Focus on critical periods of family development and reach families at their most teachable moments** – Effective programs reach families during transitional stages such as the first year of a child’s life, a child’s entry into middle school, or parental divorce or separation. Reaching parents at these times allows the content of the program to be matched to the needs of the family. Parents are also more likely to be interested in educational programs during such transitions as well as when they are having difficulty in relationships or that affects their child.
- ◆ **Start early in families’ development before unwanted negative behaviors are established** – Reaching parents early allows for the prevention of more serious problems later on.
- ◆ **Recognize the cultural traditions of the families involved** – While parenting behaviors like the expression of affection are important in all families, the ways in which they are carried out may differ from culture to culture. Moreover, parental roles and responsibilities can vary across cultures, with extended family members and other adults sharing in childrearing. Programs need to be attuned to these variations in order to be truly effective.

Program Delivery

- ◆ **Adhere to a tested and proven program design** – Program effectiveness will likely be undermined if, for example, an evidence-based parenting program using a 12-session, 2-hour weekly format is condensed to a 6-session, 3-hour weekly format. Similarly, if a monthly age-paced newsletter that is designed to be delivered to first-time parents over 12 consecutive months is instead mailed as a set of all 12 newsletters at one time, it is not as likely to have the same effect.
- ◆ **Staff appear credible to the parents they serve** – Staff are most likely to appear credible to parents when they are similar to the demographic makeup of the participants and they are respectful of them. More important than racial or ethnic matching is that staff have the following characteristics: warmth, genuineness, flexibility, humor, and empathy; communication skills (including listening); openness and willingness to share; sensitivity to family and group processes; and credibility and personal experience with children.
- ◆ **Flexible and responsive to family needs** – In order for parents to participate and focus on a program, basic needs such as meals and childcare are often provided. Safe locations and timing of programs to meet potential participants’ circumstances are critical to program success.

References

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