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EFFECTIVE PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

This brief provides a summary of features of successful parenting programs and a description of criteria researchers use to determine the effectiveness of such programs. This report relies on materials from three sources: the Rand Organization's *Promising Practices Network*; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program's (OJJDP) *Family Strengthening Series;* and the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect's *Emerging Practices* criteria for programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect. The goal of this brief is to provide parent educators with information about components of successful parent education programs, and to highlight the ways in which researchers evaluate such programs. In particular, this brief shows that programs that are shown to be effective follow rigorous evaluation standards and identify clearly-defined outcomes that are expected to result from the program.

Parent education programs provide an enormous breadth and depth of information to parents across the United States with the goals of enhancing parent-child relationships and strengthening families. There exist several types of parent education programs designed to meet the needs of various types of audiences; parents, teens or entire families. The most common types of programs involve efforts to increase participant knowledge about parenting-related matters and/or to strengthen parents' ability to identify and draw upon needed resources to support them with any challenges they face. Programs include:

- general parenting information to help all parents gain additional knowledge or skills (e.g. Parenting Skills Workshops), sometimes referred to as "family skill building;"

- parental support and information for specific groups of parents (e.g., single mothers, pregnant or parenting teens);

- targeted interventions for specific parenting issues such as alcohol dependency, substance abuse; and

- targeted intervention programs for children with special needs or problems such as low literacy or learning disabilities.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Effective programs vary in curriculum content, length of intervention, and target population. However, research (Kumpfer and Alvarado 1998; Brown 2001) shows that some broad principles are common to effective parent education programs:

❖ **Program goals should be explicitly stated as measurable outcomes.**

➢ *For example, one program deemed "proven" by the Promising Practices Network is the Parents Fair Share (PFS) Demonstration Program,[1] whose initial goals were to help unemployed, non-custodial parents (primarily fathers) secure employment, pay child support, and participate more fully in their children's lives. The evaluation examined very specific outcomes: child support payments, employment rates, and earnings, as well as formal and informal child support, and fathers' involvement in parenting (including levels of conflict between custodial and non-custodial parents).*

❖ **The program is of sufficient length and intensity relative to severity of risk factors of the family.**

➢ *OJJDP (1998) finds that "many programs fail with high risk families because they are too short to really reduce risk-producing processes and behaviors and increase protective factors and*

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[1]The program ran from 1994 through 1996 and was designed by the Manpower Demonstration and Research Corporation (MDRC) as an alternative to the local government-based child-support enforcement system. The PFS program offered services in four areas: employment and training, child-support compliance, peer support, and voluntary mediation services with the custodial parent.

behaviors (p. 8)." Conversely, programs that are too long are likely to lose busy parents who only have minor problems with their children. Thus, the appropriateness of intervention length relative to the needs of families is an important component in program design and effectiveness. Kumpfer (1999) reports that "at least 30-40 contact hours are needed for a positive and long lasting impact of family programs, particularly because high risk families often miss sessions or have difficultly implemented the skills taught in their home (p.35)."Many other interventions with lower risk families require less contact time.

❖ **The program targets a family rather than solely the children or their parents.**

➢ *The OJJDP found that this "family focus" includes interventions to address necessary issues for both the child and the parents and thus, the interactions that comprise the "family system." These programs frequently include parent skills training, children's social skills development, and parent/child activities to improve parent and child relationships. In addition, this "family skills" approach also includes additional family support services such as assistance with transportation, food, child care, and crisis support (Kumpfer, 1999).*

❖ **The program is tailored to important developmental milestones or major transitions in family life (e.g., new parents, parents of pre-adolescents or after a divorce).**

❖ **Effective programs are comprised of a strength based (asset) model, rather than focusing on parent's weaknesses or deficits.**

❖ **The program content is designed to respect parental authority and appreciate individual differences among parents.**

➢ *Understanding cultural values associated with parenting practices is critical in designing programs that can address issues of families from varied backgrounds in a manner that is consistent with their own underlying beliefs and principles. In addition, basic understanding of how a parent's culture influences parenting choices can*

then help educators identify ways to modify their views toward appropriate means of dealing with the issues they face with their children. One possible approach is to develop parenting programs specific to each race or ethnicity's parenting issues and/or cultural values. Another is to derive "culturally relevant principles to guide modifications of existing programs (Kumpfer, 1999, p.36)" instead of developing specific programs by groups.

❖ **Finally, effective programs incorporate an ecological approach to program content, which acknowledges the influence of neighborhoods, schools and employment on parenting.**

➢ *This allows for collaboration with community organizations to provide additional services and support to parents. One review of different parenting programs found that "interventions attending to…improvements in all environmental domains (i.e., society/culture, community/neighborhood, school, peer group, family/extended family) naturally demonstrated an increased effectiveness on positive developmental changes for youth (Kumpfer 1999, p. 34)." Implications for educators are two-fold: first, at the program design or curriculum development phase, input from school officials, local boards or community organizations may be useful to designing a more successful intervention; and second, delivering programs at sites within the community or at schools may also increase the success of education programs.*

CRITERIA OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Several large organizations have set forth criteria by which they classify the level of effectiveness of parent education programs. Table 1 summarizes specific criteria set forth by Rand Organization's *Promising Practices Network* and the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect's *Emerging Practices*. Rand Corporation's Promising Practices Network (PPN) highlights programs and practices that improve outcomes for children, youth and families. A major portion of their work is devoted to the "evidence criteria" used to classify programs as "proven" or "promising." The Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN) established a set of criteria for parent education programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Table 1. Criteria Used to Determine Effectiveness of Parent Education Programs

	Promising Practices Network (RAND)		
Information Type	**Proven**	**Promising**	**Not Included**
Evaluation Quality and Research design	Comparison group used to identify program impacts, including experimental or quasi-experimental design.	Comparison group used that may exhibit some weaknesses, e.g., the groups lack comparability on pre-existing variables.	Study does not use a convincing comparison group. Uses only a treatment group before and after comparisons.
Sample Size	Sample size of evaluation exceeds 30 in both treatment and comparison group.	Sample size of evaluation has more than 10 in both treatment and comparison groups.	
Outcomes Affected	Program must directly impact a pre-determined targeted outcome (e.g., increase percent of children living above poverty line).	Program may impact an intermediary outcome for which there is evidence that it is associated with one of the desired outcomes.	Program has an effect that is not related to a pre-determined target outcome.
	Emerging Practices: Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN)		
	Demonstrated Effective	**Reported Effective**	**Innovative**
Evaluation Quality and Research design	Rigorous evaluation Experimental design	Rigorous evaluation Experimental or quasi-experimental design	Programs that engage in evaluative activities Program methods show some new approach to prevention
Sample Size	Not addressed	Not addressed	Not addressed
Outcomes Affected	Evidence shows positive effect of program. Outcomes are definitively stated in program design.	Available evidence shows positive effect of program. Outcomes are not considered definitive because of a concern with the program's initial design and/or stated goals.	Results not as clear as other programs; inconclusive outcomes due to a methodological concern.

OCAN categorizes programs as "demonstrated effective," "reported effective," or "innovative." The types of information used to make the distinction among programs include evaluation quality and research design, sample size and outcomes affected. It is important to note that categories are distinguished by the level of scientific rigor of both the evaluation design and the analysis of the outcome data.

As shown in Table 1, Rand's Promising Practices criteria focus on evaluation methods, with particular emphasis on study design, including sample size, random assignment of comparison groups, and the strength of evidence for each outcome reported by programs. The Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN) criteria do not focus as heavily on evaluation design. In contrast, OCAN's primary distinction among categories relies on

the outcomes reported; both the evidence of a positive effect and whether or not the goals of the program are explicitly set forth as quantifiable outcomes in the program design.

The criteria set forth by these organizations show that the distinguishing factors of effective program evaluation are both the scientific rigor of the evaluation design and the measurement of clearly defined outcomes. One central component is whether or not the evaluation utilized an experimental[2] or quasi-experimental design[3] (i.e., measuring changes in outcomes with a comparison group

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[2]An experimental design randomly assigns participants to a treatment (comprised of those who did participate in an education program) and control group (comprised of those who did not participate in an education program). The random assignment of these two groups allows for researchers to determine if the outcome found was attributable to the parent

as well as a treatment group). Another key component is defining the goals of the program at the outset, and including measures that can assess potential changes in this outcome as a result of the program in the evaluation.

Although not all parent education programs can be part of large scale evaluation efforts, there are two important points that can inform educators' choices at both the program planning and evaluation stages of their projects. First, programs that lend themselves to outcome based evaluations set forth clearly articulated *measurable* goals at the project outset. The effective programs listed in the three sources discussed focus less on participant satisfaction and more on specific impacts of program efforts on participant's parenting attitudes or behaviors. Both the clear articulation of outcomes to be measured and the emphasis on attitudinal or behavior changes as outcomes (rather than satisfaction) can increase the likelihood of continued funding of these programs. As such, parent educators who can accomplish both of these tasks as part of program design increase the opportunities for funding, and allow for a more widely accepted measure of their program's impact. Second, the results of these larger scale evaluations (as well as the criteria used by larger research organizations) can provide useful examples to educators about key elements to incorporate into their programs, and guide their own planning and evaluation efforts.

SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS

- Research highlights components of a successful program.

- Review of the major research on criteria used to determine the effectiveness of parent education programs illustrates the importance of evaluation design (particularly random assignment of treatment and control groups), rigor and results for measuring success of many types of parent education programs.

- Evaluation efforts must include the compilation of *clearly defined* outcome data that provides evidence of program effectiveness. For example, if the desired outcomes of a parent education program are not clearly

education program (the "treatment") or to another reasonable factor. This design is considered the strongest method to make such an assessment.

[3] Quasi-experimental designs also involve the comparison of two groups; however, members of the treatment and control groups are not randomly assigned, and thus, the comparability of the two groups is less certain. As a result, it is more difficult to conclude that an outcome is the result of the treatment itself and not due to some other difference between the groups.

stated, any tools designed to measure such outcomes (e.g., questionnaires or surveys) may not be well utilized, and thus, assessing the effect of a program on its participants will be problematic.

- Parent educators can increase the likelihood of a "successful" determination under these criteria by *including a comprehensive plan of evaluation as a critical component of program design*.

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