

INFORMATION PACKET

Parent Training

This information packet discusses parent training and is intended for professionals who suggest or order interventions in child protection cases, such as casework staff, family court judges, guardians ad litem, and attorneys. Although this paper focuses on parenting classes and group participation, it is recognized that parent training is only one component of a comprehensive treatment or placement plan. Beebe James, former director of Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, prepared this document for the Children's Law Office.

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, there were almost 1,000,000 confirmed reports of child maltreatment in the United States (PCAA), 5000 of them in South Carolina (SCDSS). Approximately three children die each day in our country from abuse or neglect with 75% of these deaths occurring to children under the age of five. According to Prevent Child Abuse America, the top causes cited by reporting agencies for these reports included **poverty** (and other economic stressors), **lack of parental capacity and skill, domestic violence and substance abuse, frequently in combination** (2001). All who work in the child welfare arena recognize that many

families are in crisis and that child maltreatment is a problem of staggering proportions. Also easily recognized is the fact that without strong support, these families cannot survive intact. Less easily determined is the most appropriate type of support for each family.

It is widely accepted that adult parenting behaviors are modeled on childhood experience and that both positive and negative family experiences growing up have a direct impact on the attitudes and practices individuals will utilize in raising their own children. While we recognize the intergenerational effect of parenting, it remains the adult responsibility that receives the least attention in our educational system. Therefore, all parents need support and training appropriate to the issues they face at any point in their parenting career. However, biological parents and other individuals who have already abused their children (or those who are working with children who have been abused or neglected) have a need for intensive education and support in parenting and discipline issues. The vast majority of abusive parents lack the knowledge and imprinting to nurture their children in a positive way. In addition, most of these

parents are not successful in providing consistent and effective discipline, which then results in children who present more discipline problems. Parent training and family support can take a variety of forms depending on the needs of a family at any given time. While this paper will primarily focus on parenting classes and group participation, clearly the best hope for a positive result in crisis-oriented families comes from a combination of efforts that include parenting classes combined with home-based or center-based programs.

It should be clear that parenting education is just one leg of the family support stool and, although extremely important, it cannot replace other community efforts or major employment initiatives. Issues of food, housing, medical attention, and other basic needs as well as violence and substance abuse treatment must either be incorporated into the program or addressed separately.

PARENTING EDUCATION: WHAT IS IT?

The term “Parent Education” has many meanings. It has been described by the National Parenting Education Network as “the activity of making available resources for transferring knowledge and skills relevant to living with and guiding children” (1998). Essentially, parent education encompasses a variety of programs and strategies (direct educational interventions) designed to increase parental knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Although parent training groups have been in existence since the early 19th century, the concern for increasing parents’ knowledge and skill has taken on new urgency during the past 20 years with mandatory reporting laws enacted in all states. The increasing number of maltreatment reports, as well as an increasing awareness of the fact that most community problems are rooted in family issues, has led to a proliferation of parent support programs.

These programs are diverse and are offered in a variety of contexts. Churches, schools, government agencies, non-profit organizations, community groups, hospitals, and medical clinics offer forms of parent support, which meet the needs of particular populations. Programs may focus on special age groups (i.e. teen parents, early childhood, parents of middle school or high school students), special needs (i.e. parents of children with developmental disabilities or particular illnesses), or particular philosophical or religious bases. They may be geared towards first time parents as well as parents who are abusive or determined to be at high risk for abuse or neglect. They may be several weeks or many months or years in duration and vary in intensity and frequency of contact. In order to achieve a positive result, special importance must be placed on identifying the most appropriate setting and curriculum for a particular family.

In addition to classes and groups, parenting support programs in South Carolina include home visiting programs such as Healthy Families for new parents, Parent Aides for high risk or abusive families, or Family Partners for parents of children with special needs; center-based programs such as the Nurturing Center in Columbia; parent-led support groups such as Parents Anonymous; or school-based programs such as Parents as Teachers.

PARENTING EDUCATION IN A GROUP SETTING

Through the years, parenting groups have evolved as a response to the needs of society and communities. Prior to the 1970’s, classes provided information on child development and growth. Rarely were parents given explicit instruction on how to discipline effectively, how to communicate with children, and concrete support in anger management and self-care. The 1970’s brought parent skill-building programs offering strategies for appropriately dealing with children (i.e. Parent Effectiveness Training and the Systematic Training for Effective

Parenting program). These programs were very carefully structured, utilized a variety of learning techniques, and included training manuals for parents with exercises for them to complete at home. Classes were usually 8-10 weeks in duration and designed to accommodate 8-15 parents rather than individuals or large groups (Alvy, 1994).

In recent years, the emphasis in parent education has moved from didactic classes which "teach" parents to a stronger emphasis on comprehensive programs in which parents and professionals work together to create strong family systems. It is recognized that parents are the experts on their own family strengths, needs, and issues, and play the central role in family well-being. Most effective programs build on family strengths, incorporating those components which will best address family needs.

Many curricula currently exist to build parenting skills and knowledge. As stated above, the classes utilizing these curricula are offered by a wide variety of private and public agencies and organizations to address a wide variety of family needs. Most of these address parent knowledge, family functioning, and changes in parental attitudes and behaviors.

PARENTING CLASSES FOR MALTREATING FAMILIES

Parenting classes can be beneficial for families in the child welfare system, and can be especially effective when combined with a home or center-based program. Frequently, maltreating families require a higher level of support than can be experienced in a short-term group setting. These families can achieve more significant results when group activity is combined with the more intensive and longer term, one-on-one support of home visitation such as Parent Aide programs. Parenting education has been successful in helping to maintain children in the home as well as achieving necessary changes in biological parents who are preparing for reunification with their children. Frequently,

once children have been returned to their family, support for parents is removed. These families can especially benefit from a parenting support group such as Parents Anonymous. Such groups can encourage friendships and alliances with group participants and program leaders, which help to prevent the emotional isolation almost always experienced by abusive parents.

Emphasis is currently placed on the voluntary nature of effective programs with parents choosing to participate in the parent education which is offered. However, parenting classes are also appropriate for court-ordered families if issues of motivation and retention are addressed in the class. Programs which meet the needs of these families must be prepared to deal with resistance and anger generated by their resistance to the system itself. Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina has learned in their Parent Education/Parent Support groups that initial sessions must incorporate a response to this resistance before substantive parenting work can begin. While drop-outs are a problem with all parenting programs, one study has shown that court-ordered families were more likely to complete programs than voluntary participants although they probably would not have participated at all without the court order. Court-ordered families seem to benefit most when the court order specifies the nature of the program and articulates the behavioral changes expected (Irueste-Montez and Montez, 1988).

While any parenting program can be adapted to apply to abusive parents, some programs offered in South Carolina are especially targeted for high risk and abusive parents such as the Nurturing Parenting Program and the PEPS Program (Parent Education/Parent Support).

EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENTING GROUPS

It is difficult to demonstrate through research the efficacy of parenting education. Frequently, a combination of support efforts

makes it difficult to identify the single program which accomplished the desired result. Increasingly, however, studies are beginning to suggest that a variety of outcomes take place (Repucci, Britner, Woolard, 1997):

- Increased parental knowledge of child development
- Increased knowledge of adequate health care practices
- Decrease in authoritarian parental attitudes
- Increased responsible decision-making
- Increased parental confidence in their parenting ability

Programs which incorporate experiential learning techniques have demonstrated behavioral changes which include increased active listening skills. While these results are promising, there is still uncertainty about the significance of parenting education in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. (Repucci, Britner, Wollard, 1997).

Anecdotally, Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina has seen a positive response in their efforts to help parents with anger management and self care.

SELECTING A PARENTING CLASS

Selecting an appropriate parent training setting for a particular family can be a challenging endeavor. Parents who have a history of abuse or neglect or are considered to be at high risk are best referred to a program specifically designed to work with maltreating families. The following issues may help to guide selection of a quality program.

- **Strength-based:** Traditionally, parent education efforts have been based on parenting deficits frequently overlooking family strengths. Look for programs which enable parents to identify the strengths in their family and build on them as a major tool for success.

- **Duration and intensity:** Programs structured to meet the needs of high risk families meet a minimum of 8-12 weeks with classes meeting for 1 ½ -2 hours in order to experience a reported change in attitude and hopefulness about their child-rearing skills, and a desire to emulate those leaders who naturally emerge in the class and serve as positive role models.
- **Clear standards and expectations:** Clear standards for successful completion of the program and statement of expectations of group participation are essential for success. In the PEPS program operated by Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, parents are required to attend 10 of 12 sessions, be on time, and are evaluated on group participation.
- **Culturally relevant:** Many programs are designed primarily for white middle class families and their value for ethnic minorities and low- income families is questionable. Identify a program that is relevant in terms of gender, race, and economic background. Respect for and valuing of special religious, ethnic, and cultural living patterns strengthens both participation and the potential for cross-cultural sharing and change.
- **Accessibility:** It is important that programs consider the transportation and child care needs of participants. Where transportation is not provided by the program itself, it is essential that public transportation be easily available. Some programs, such as the Nurturing Program, include children in program activities. When this is not the case, provision of child care is critical. Groups should be scheduled at times of the day when targeted participants can access services and in places where they will feel comfortable.
- **Staff :** The competence of facilitators or group leaders is critical. Programs may use volunteers, professionals, or parent leaders (or any combination) successfully.

However, facilitators must receive high quality training and supervision in areas specific to the audience such as child abuse and neglect, teen parenting, domestic violence, etc. In addition, facilitators should be trained in group dynamics and the art of engaging and retaining even the most hesitant participant. It is generally recommended that two facilitators lead each group. The strengths of each facilitator provide for better odds of connecting with clients, and two people provide better perspective as they review the client's participation and attitude. This also ensures more adequate safety in the class for both participants and facilitators.

- **Adult learning techniques:** Utilization of a variety of learning techniques is critical to adult learning. Videos, role play, creative activities, and visual displays join lecture in the best programs.
- **Parental involvement.** Parents are involved in the planning, execution, and evaluation of effective programs, enlisting them in a working relationship with program leaders.
- **Evaluation :** Successful programs have ongoing evaluation with the evaluation instrument tied to outcome measures which demonstrate that the curriculum and teacher are effective in creating a change in the learner's attitudes and knowledge.

APPROPRIATE GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Parenting classes best address problems related to a lack of knowledge or skill. Most people want to be good parents, but individuals who have not received adequate parenting themselves have difficulty recognizing and meeting the needs of their children. They may have little understanding of the ways in which children develop and may be overwhelmed by the responsibility with which they are faced. Some who have been abused themselves in childhood have difficulty with anger management. For these

parents, the training and guidance of a group facilitator and the support of a group environment can be extremely beneficial.

However, some people are not appropriate participants in such a group. They are unable to benefit from this environment and prevent others from achieving positive results. The following should be screened from parenting class participation:

- Individuals in active addiction are disruptive to the class and unable to achieve positive results. However, those in recovery programs may well benefit from class participation.
- A parenting class is *never* the appropriate treatment for a perpetrator of child sexual abuse although it *may* be effective for the non-offending parent.
- Victims of mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder, or post-traumatic stress disorder require individual therapy and only when these conditions are well-controlled should the individual be referred for a parenting class. Parents with very low intelligence levels may benefit best from programs which offer one-on-one support.
- Parenting classes cannot replace individual and group counseling for untreated victims of child sexual abuse.

REFERRING A PARENT TO CLASSES

Once a program has been selected for a parent, the referral process is extremely important. The program leader or coordinator needs complete information on the family background and the caseworker's evaluation of family strengths and needs in order to most effectively work with the parent. Any possible barriers to success should be addressed among the parent, caseworker, and program coordinator prior to class participation.

During the course of the class, the caseworker should expect access to the program coordinator and/or class facilitator as necessary (as should the program coordinator be able to contact the caseworker). Most programs offer a certificate of completion to a participant who has successfully met the guidelines of the programs, a final evaluation of the client's participation, and (when necessary) program coordinators are available to the court.

SUMMARY

Parenting is the life role which is most important and for which people are least prepared. All parents need support and can benefit from parenting education at various times in their parenting career. This support is best delivered as early as possible in a family's life, preferably before harm occurs to children. Many experts define home-based services as the most effective method of providing primary prevention and early intervention support. However, parenting classes and support groups are achieving positive results in high risk and maltreating families.

While parenting classes have been offered as support to families since early in the 19th Century, the past twenty years have brought a new urgency as society has become increasingly aware of the fact that community problems are rooted in family issues and mandated reporting laws have led to an increase in the numbers of abuse reports. The proliferation of classes which have followed are offered in a variety of settings to meet a variety of parental needs. Classes and support groups are appropriate for many families in the child welfare system and court-ordered participation can be beneficial.

SAMPLE PARENTING PROGRAMS

Following are samples of quality parent training programs that are available in South Carolina. For specific information about programs available in your area, contact your

local child abuse prevention organization or Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, (803) 733-5430 or 800-Children.

NURTURING PROGRAM – Developed from previous research of Bavolek, Kline and McLaughlin (1978) which led to the development of the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) to identify known constructs of abusive parenting. The Nurturing Parenting Programs are designed to treat and prevent these practices from occurring. Programs have been field-tested with abusive and high-risk families. The 13 separate programs adapted for specific populations are being implemented in the US, Canada, Mexico, Europe, South America, and Israel. Frequency and length vary with type of program, generally 2 ½ - 3 hours once a week.

SC Contact: Jill H. Smith, LMSW
Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina,
2638 Two Notch Road, Suite 108,
Columbia, SC 29204

PEPS (Parent Education/Parent Support)
–A 12-week parenting class that meets once a week for two hours. Class time is divided into two segments with first hour devoted to parent education and the latter hour a parent support group based on the model of Parents Anonymous South Carolina. Most parents are referred through SC DSS; however, classes are offered as a community service to all parents. PEPS is taught by trained volunteers and professionals who utilize adult learning theories. Child care is provided at no charge.

Contact: Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina (see above address)

PARENTS ANONYMOUS OF SOUTH CAROLINA – Parents Anonymous is a national organization founded in 1970 through efforts of a mother seeking help to create a safe caring environment for her children. Groups provide parent education and family support based on curricula developed by the national organization. Parents Anonymous

groups in South Carolina are available throughout the state for all parents free of charge. Weekly on-going programs are co-led by parents and professionally trained facilitators. While parents attend classes, children participate in a Children's Program.

SC Contact: Marty Banks
Director
Parents Anonymous of SC
Post Office Box 80099
Charleston, SC 29416

EFFECTIVE BLACK PARENTING –

Developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring to provide parenting education for African American parents. This curriculum is intended to foster effective family communication, healthy African American identity, extended family values, child growth and development, and healthy self-esteem. Special units focus on alcohol and other drug use prevention, pride in blackness, and single parenting. Involves fourteen sessions of 3 hours with a 15th session serving as graduation.

Contact: Dr. Kerby T. Alvy
Center for the Improvement of Child Caring,
11331 Ventura Blvd., Suite 103
Studio City, California 91604

SC PARENT ASSISTANCE PROJECT – A

program of the Alliance for South Carolina's Children to provide sound early child development information and skills to parents of children between the ages of birth and 5. However, services are available to parents of all children. Programs are provided through regional offices in Beaufort, Florence, Greenville, and Lexington and include workshops, support groups, community outreach, and book/toy lending libraries. Core work is based on the Parents as Teachers and Parent Child Home curricula. Each center is staffed with trained parent educators.

SC Contact: Marga McKee
SC Parent Assistance Project

Alliance for South Carolina's Children
Post Office Box 11644
Columbia, SC 29211
www.scchildren.org for regional contacts

PARENT AIDES- An intensive home visitation program for maltreating parents or those at high risk for abuse or neglect. Parent Aides provide therapeutic services, 24-hour crisis intervention, role modeling, and transportation with services provided by trained para-professionals. Families remain in the program for 12-24 months and multidisciplinary treatment teams provide service coordination.

Contact: Bernetta Cooper
Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina
2638 Two Notch Road, Suite 108
Columbia, SC 29204

REFERENCES

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