

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Parenting Skills: Evaluating and Designing Effective Parent Education Programs

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(Published online February 22, 2008)

Service Perspective

The CEECD papers on parenting skills¹⁻¹⁰ provide a rich balance of different points of view from key people in the field, presenting the main issues and research findings clearly to a general audience. As a whole, the papers confirm that parenting is critically important to children's development—a fact that is sometimes downplayed amid the myriad of messages about other factors that contribute to a child's social and emotional development, such as their non-parental care environments. While there is no single answer as to how to maximize parenting, there is some consensus in the field that warmth combined with control is optimal. To this end, the summary offered by Bornstein and Bornstein⁴ of Baumrind's typology of parenting styles—authoritarian, indulgent permissive, authoritative, neglectful—is helpful in establishing a framework for discussion.

The CEECD papers also show that in general, the research says that parenting education can make a difference. This is important for community practitioners, and a key concern of the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada), a national, non-profit organization that promotes the well-being of families by providing national leadership, consultation and resources to those who care for children and support families. We have noted a real desire among people working with parents to find out what seems to work well, so that they can offer the best programs possible.

It is refreshing to see included in this collection the Trivette and Dunst² paper, which is more focussed on the *process* of offering parenting support programs than on the content. Typically, research on the impact of parenting education studies specific programs or curricula, when in fact, *how* we do things may be just as important as *what* we do, perhaps even more so. In particular, Trivette and Dunst examine the effects of family-centred help-giving that involves two important dimensions: relational practices (compassion, active listening, mutual trust, etc.) and participatory practices (i.e. to what extent parents are involved in deciding what knowledge they need and how they want to acquire it). Trivette and Dunst conclude that participatory help-giving practices lead to the strongest outcomes. This research suggests that program developers and facilitators

should provide many opportunities for participant choice and decision-making when designing and offering parenting programs.

Gaps between research, policy and practice

The flexibility required in order for a parenting program to be truly participatory creates certain challenges for researchers, however. To gather evidence using the scientific method, parameters must be strictly controlled, ensuring the same “dose” every time. Only then can the evidence about impact be directly tied to the specific program. The prevailing view of program developers and policy makers, therefore, is that the curriculum should not be modified in any way, because that would throw the validity of the research into question. As a result, some parenting programs currently being offered in Canada do not encourage or even permit adaptations in response to participants’ particular interests or needs. This pressure to strictly “teach” the curriculum rather than to facilitate shared learning is a natural (and unfortunate) development, flowing from the current practice of rewarding programs that can produce evidence of effectiveness from multiple research studies and penalizing those that can’t.

When thinking about future directions in this area of research, I would hope that more attention could be paid to identifying the elements or components of parenting programs that appear to be effective—both content and process. Some of these elements are identified throughout the CEECD papers, which is very helpful. Community practitioners often prefer to build their own programs in response to the parents they serve, and may feel restricted by the constraints or limitations of programs developed for other populations or based on theories such as behaviour management that originated in clinical settings. They might find it more helpful to know what combination of elements (information and process) would make up a good parenting program. That way, they could apply this knowledge by trying to ensure that these elements are included in their own program designs.

As well, the development and dissemination of simple, economical and non-intrusive instruments that are designed to measure program quality and effectiveness would be extremely helpful because they could be applied to many different programs and settings. Some facilitators are uncomfortable using research instruments that have high literacy levels or are deficit- rather than strength-based. We need to find ways of conducting research that are consistent in every way with the goal of building parental competence and confidence.

The CEECD papers provide a good overview of this topic, demonstrating that it is a complicated issue. As Belsky⁶ noted, “there should be no single way to promote growth-fostering parenting.” When making decisions about choosing parenting programs, this is a statement well worth remembering.

Comments recorded by Eve Krakow

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To cite this document:

MacAulay J. Voices from the field – Parenting skills: Evaluating and designing effective parent education programs. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2008:1-4. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/MacAulayANGps.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

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