Should We Invest in Parenting Education?

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Both public and private entities—from county and state governments to small non-profits and large foundations—are asking the question:

"Should we invest in parenting education?"

Wisely answering that question demands asking and answering five other questions:

1. *Does parenting make a difference in a child's development?*
2. *People have been parenting since human time began. Why do we need parenting education now?*
3. *What is effective parenting?*
4. *Can parenting education create more effective parents?*
5. *What does high-quality, effective parenting education look like?*

The answers to these questions can be found in scientific research conducted over the past 30 years.

1. Does parenting make a difference in a child's development?

Parents do matter! Of all the things that influence a child's growth and development, the most critical is reliable, responsive, and sensitive parenting (Lurie-Hurvitz, 2009). Parents play a key role in a child's development. When parenting is at its best, children thrive. Research summarized by the nation's most prestigious scientists confirms that to develop to their fullest potential, children must have early relationships that provide stability, consistency, affection, and responsiveness as well as protection from harm

and support for growth of new skills and capabilities (Glasser and Heath, 2004; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Strong attachments also buffer children against social and behavioral problems.

When young children experience nurturing relationships, they develop self-awareness, self-regulation, social competence, and emotional stability. Differences in parenting practices account for up to 50 percent of the gaps in school readiness (Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005). Effective early parenting contributes to later development of cognitive and social skills, positive

parent-child and peer relationships, and prevention of delinquency, risky behaviors, and school failure (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007). For children who do not experience care that meets their needs or provides nurturance over a long term, the challenge is greater in getting them on a healthy life trajectory. The American Psychological Association (2009) stresses that efforts to promote a safe, stable, nurturing, and stimulating home environment early in a child's life can significantly and positively affect the child's developmental growth trajectory for years to come, with benefits for the child, family, and society at large.

The quality of parent-child relationships has diverse roots in family ecology, marital relationships, and adults' life histories (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). If families are to nurture their children, communities must reduce the stresses on families that arise from poverty, social isolation, untreated physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and community violence.

2. People have been parenting since human time began. Why do we need parenting education now?

Parenting skills are learned. Parents have always sought support in raising their children, regardless of their socioeconomic position or culture. Historically, parents obtained this support from their family network (Zepeda and Morales, 2001). Families today are more mobile, and many families no longer live near extended family members—those who traditionally provided informal support, advice, and assistance. As families have become smaller and separated by distance, the ease of passing on child-rearing wisdom has decreased.

According to the National Commission on Children's national survey (1991), 88% of adults believe that it is harder to be a parent than it used to be. Since the 1980s, most families have had to have both parents working outside the home to survive economically. This leaves less time for family responsibilities, self-care, or finding social support. Rising rates of crime, the availability of alcohol and drugs, and declining connections with families and neighbors further complicate parenting. Eighty-six percent of parents reported that they are often uncertain about what is the right thing to do in raising their children (National Commission on Children, 1991).

Some families need only basic information and access to community resources to do well. Other families are overburdened by poverty, lack of employment and education, homelessness, physical or cognitive limitations, domestic violence, mental health problems, or drug and alcohol abuse. These families need more intense and targeted education and support to keep their children safe and thriving.

Poverty is a significant stressor for many young families and children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, on average 25.5% of Oregon's children lived in households below the federal poverty line between 2006 and 2008. Children living in poverty can be found not only in the greater Portland metropolitan area and other larger cities, but also in rural and frontier counties. For these rural families, social isolation and lack of services compound their challenges. Families of color, recent immigrants, single-parent families, and very young families have substantially higher rates of poverty than the general population.

In addition, many parents are at risk for maltreatment or other poor outcomes because their own rearing was not positive. These parents want and need help to learn more positive ways of rearing their children. The American Psychological Association (2009) advocates that addressing the problem of child maltreatment from a public health perspective, with a focus on primary prevention (i.e., before any maltreatment) and promotion of healthy family functioning universally (i.e., for the entire population) is a promising framework for child maltreatment prevention.

In short, social, family, and economic forces have made parenting a more isolated and difficult job.

3. What is effective parenting?

Core behaviors that demonstrate effective parenting have been identified across cultural and economic groups and communities (NICHD, 2001). These are the behaviors that nurture children as they develop from infancy through adolescence.

Nurturing and affection: Effective parents demonstrate caring by meeting their child's basic and emotional needs.

Attentiveness, engagement, and responsiveness: Effective parents participate in their child's life.

Reliability and consistency: Effective parents can be counted on to not only respond to their child's needs, but to also demonstrate steadiness and constancy in their expectations, words, and actions over time.

Monitoring, mentoring, and modeling: Effective parents pay attention to their child's behavior, encourage desired behaviors, and provide a consistent, positive example for their child.

Clearly these behaviors demand skills and a willingness to learn and change as children grow and circumstances change. Age-appropriate monitoring of a young child looks very different than age-appropriate monitoring of a pre-teen. Even in the same family, individual children differ; what worked for the oldest may not work at all for a younger sibling. Nevertheless, at all stages of a child's development, effective parents monitor their child's safety and behavior and provide reliable and nurturing guidance.

4. Can parenting education create more effective parents?

Parenting education is defined as an "organized programmatic effort to change or enhance the child-rearing knowledge and skills of a family system or a child care system" (Arcus, Schvanefeldt, and Moss, 1993). Parenting education expands parent knowledge about child development, builds parent skills, strengthens parent-child relationships, and promotes age-appropriate care and activities that enhance a child's health, development, and social emotional skills (DeBord and Matta, 2002; Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007).

Effective parenting education programs enhance parents' child-rearing skills, competence, and confidence (Carter and Kahn, 1996). There are proven strategies to effectively support families and young children whatever their level of need or risk (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007). No one strategy will fit all needs or situations, but proven strategies can support and benefit families at all levels of risk or need. Health, education, and social service providers recognize parenting education as a powerful prevention strategy that can not only reduce child maltreatment but also promote positive family and child development. Even when families face very significant issues, they can be helped through participation in effective programs and services.

According to the Zero to Three Policy Center, cost-benefit analyses conducted by numerous economists clearly demonstrate the importance of the earliest experiences and interventions for at-risk children. Economic analysis demonstrates that for every dollar invested in early childhood programs, savings of $3.78 to $17.07 can be

expected. These savings occur as early interventions promote school retention, improve the quality of the workplace, help schools to be more productive, raise earnings, strengthen social attachments, and reduce crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency (Lurie-Hurvitz, 2009).

5. *What does effective parenting education look like?*
Effective parenting education utilizes skilled professional parent educators who deliver powerful evidence-based curriculum programs. Effective programs share several characteristics.

Strong parenting education programs actively engage parents through discussion and experiential learning. All learners process new information according to their existing beliefs. Open-ended, parent-dominated discussion provides an opportunity for parents to digest new insights in relation to their existing ideas and experiences. In addition, experiential learning may include observation and critique of videos, role-playing, homework in which parents try out ideas at home, parent-to-parent calls, and/or facilitator-to-parent calls to solve problems between classes.

High-quality parenting education programs are characterized by collaborative, equal relations between parents and program staff (Powell, 1990). The intent is to empower parents in their child-rearing roles. Parent educators are facilitators of goals and activities jointly determined by parents and program staff, rather than experts who assume they know what is best for parents. Illustrative of this approach is open-ended discussion of parent-initiated topics as opposed to a largely one-way flow of information from staff to parent. Collaborative parent-staff relationships help ensure that program methods and content respond to parents' needs.

Effective parenting education programs maintain a balanced focus on the needs of both the child and parent, including significant attention to the social context of parenthood. This approach assumes that providing parents with helpful interpersonal relationships and material assistance (if needed) will enhance parent functioning and, ultimately, child development. Programs seek to

build parents' social networks, social support, and community ties as buffers against stressful life circumstances and transitions.

High-quality parenting education and support programs are responsive to the needs and characteristics of the population being served. This idea is evident in efforts to design programs that are responsive to cultural characteristics and values of ethnic populations and serve parents living in high-risk circumstances. Effective programs acknowledge and address critical family needs.

Programs that work with parents who are experiencing depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, or other serious risks have been shown to be more successful when these challenges are recognized and addressed with additional services (Barth, 2009). Parents' individual needs can overwhelm their ability to parent. In such situations, parenting education programs must be closely linked to and work with services that can assist the parent to address the issues that limit effective parenting, including substance abuse, extreme poverty, domestic violence, homelessness, depression, and other mental health issues.

In addition, *these parental challenges should be recognized and addressed* **within** *the parenting education setting itself*. For example, a Participant Enhancement Intervention (PEI) (Nock and Kazdin, 2005 was tested within 11 home visitation parenting education programs for very high-risk families. Under this PEI intervention, 15 minutes during the first, fifth, and seventh home visits were devoted to specific discussion of the parents' motivation and barriers to change. The home visitor/parent educator and the parent then worked together to develop a plan that would allow the parent to overcome the barriers and make a positive change. In a randomized control trial, parents who received PEI had greater treatment motivation, attended significantly more treatment sessions, and adhered more closely to treatment, according to both parent and visitor reports.

Within the parenting education setting, however, "parenting support" should not overshadow attention to the actual education about the child that builds parents' specific child-rearing skills. In particular, programs serving high-risk populations must resist becoming so heavily involved in family crisis intervention that parenting education becomes secondary. Collaboration and referral linkages with other community agencies are essential to ensure that parenting education programs can focus on parenting education.

Research has identified several other elements that are common across effective parenting education programs. These include the following:

Early intervention results in better and more durable outcomes for parents and children. This may be especially important when children are at risk of or have behavioral problems. Later intervention is better than none and may help parents deal with parenting under stress.

A strong theory base and a clearly articulated model of change are also needed to make interventions effective.

Behavioral interventions that build specific parenting skills and offer practical "take-home tips" for changing parenting behaviors are also considered more effective than vague conceptual approaches.

Explicit strategies to recruit, engage, and retain parents are core elements of promising parenting programs.

Interventions of longer duration, with follow-up and booster sessions, are most beneficial, especially for problems of greater severity or for higher risk groups.

To ensure program integrity upon replication in a new setting, evidence-based or proven model programs should offer structured curricula and services. These curricula should be delivered by appropriately trained and supervised staff and backed up by good management and support that includes program monitoring and evaluation.

In conclusion, there is strong evidence that parenting skills are critical to children's optimal well-being and development and that parenting skills can be enhanced by effective parenting education. Moreover, high-quality parenting education is not only possible, but also definable and replicable. Building on what we now know, investments in high-quality parenting education will be among the best investments any community can make.

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