



Parenting 101

Teaching parents to be better parents to improve child well-

Dispensing parenting advice, long the domain of grandmothers and other family members, is getting more attention from policymakers and others looking for ways to strengthen families and communities.

Heightened interest in parenting education reflects the growing awareness of the parent's role in the development of children. Studies show effective parenting improves a child's chances of healthy development, while ineffective parenting works against favorable outcomes. Poor parenting can, for example, induce or exacerbate emotional problems and contribute to mental health problems that affect 20% of America's 64 million children.¹

The busy lives of today's parents is a source of further concern.

More and more children come from families in which both parents work or a child's only parent works. Children are spending more time with alternate caregivers. And less time is spent engaging in parent-child activities and family interaction.² Parents, under such conditions, risk becoming less tolerant because of decreased energy and high stress, and their children may receive less parental supervision.

Studies suggest teaching parents how to be better parents can prevent some of the emotional damage associated with ineffective parenting. Some employers, in fact, have begun

including parent education on the menu of services offered parents to help them balance work and families.

Effective, To A Degree

Parenting education tries to make parents more competent, often by increasing their knowledge of child development and behavior, working to improve their self-esteem as parents, and teaching them how to communicate more effectively with their children. The effectiveness of such programs are difficult to measure. Few evaluate their effectiveness at all. And many variations of the same curriculum are often used, complicating comparison. Nevertheless, several of the most popular parent education programs in the U.S. have been found to be effective to some degree with some populations, although some of the gains seen among parents tend to fade over time.

Parents as Teachers (PAT)

Perhaps the most widely-used parent education program is Parents as Teachers (PAT), developed in 1981 with several goals in mind, including empowering parents to give children a foundation for success in school, and preventing and reducing child abuse.

Services are delivered through home visits or group meetings. Curriculum includes child development and activities on language development, intellectual growth, social and motor skills, and the parent-child relationship.

PAT is one of the most extensively evaluated of all parent education

A study of abusive adults reported the number of families involved with social services for reasons of child abuse fell significantly one year after the parents completed a parenting education program.

programs. A summary of the studies, published by PAT International Center, Inc., includes the following findings:

- PAT children score significantly higher on standardized measures of math and reading at the end of first grade than comparison children.
- PAT leads to reduced child placement in special programs and a lower incidence of abuse and neglect.

Mixed findings were reported in a study of the Teen PAT program.³ The program had little effect on parenting knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors when PAT teens were compared with teens outside the program. However, the children of PAT parents and parents who received PAT with case-management services showed improved cognitive, social, and self-help development.

Active Parenting

Developing human potential is the focus of Active Parenting. The program's

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video-based curriculum covers a range of issues and teaches discipline and communication skills, such as conveying positive regard and avoiding discouraging interactions, listening therapeutically, and resolving problems.

Although several studies of Acting Parenting have been done, all are limited and most are based on parent self reports. Overall, studies suggest the program helps to improve a parent's knowledge of child rearing. One study⁴, for example, reports that:

- 97% of the parents said they decreased their rate of negative behaviors, such as yelling and punishment, and increased their positive behaviors, such as encouragement.
- 84% of the parents felt their children were less prone to tantrums and yelling, became more cooperative and self-confident, and expressed affection more often.

The Nurturing Program

The Nurturing Program aims to prevent child abuse by increasing knowledge of child development, building self-esteem within the family, and improving parenting skills.

All family members participate in a curriculum that teaches such skills as recognizing the needs and feelings of others, interacting and communicating warmly, replacing hitting or yelling with more effective methods of behavior management, and handling stress and anger. Weekly sessions can extend for as long as 45 weeks.

Studies that examined the program's impact on abusive adults and abused children suggest the program was effective in several areas.⁵ For example:

- Of the parents completing the program, 93% were rated by

program instructors as having successfully changed their abusive interactions with their children.

- Attitudes of parents improved significantly, including age-appropriate expectations, empathy for the needs of others, and alternatives to corporal punishment.
- The number of families involved with social services for reasons of child abuse fell significantly one year after program completion.

STEP

Created in 1976, Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) is designed to help parents understand misbehavior, create a cooperative family environment, and use appropriate consequences to control behavior.

The program consists of nine weekly sessions during which videotapes, lectures, discussions, and readings

focus on topics related to understanding children, using encouragement, talking and listening to children, and cooperation.

Studies suggest STEP has potential to improve the attitudes of parents and, in some cases, the behavior of children as reported by parents. For example:

- Thirteen of the 16 studies in which parental attitude was measured reported that parents improved in acceptance, trust, and democracy.
- Eight out of the 10 studies that measured parent-perceived changes in children's behavior – attention-getting, yelling, fighting, etc. – reported significant positive changes.

What studies report about STEP and several other parenting education programs is encouraging, if not definitive: although outcomes are sometimes limited, there are ways in which parents can be taught to be better parents.

references

This report was based on *Parent Education: A Review of Six Widely Disseminated Programs*, a report by Kelly E. Mehaffie, a graduate student in the Developmental Psychology program at the University of Pittsburgh, written with the support of The Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood and Parenting Education, administered by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

¹ Behrman, R.E. (Ed.). (1992). U.S. health care for children. *The Future of Children*, 2(2). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

² Alvy, K.T. (1994). *Parent training today*. Studio City CA: Center for the Improvement of Child Caring.

³ Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Gerlach-Downie, S. (1996). *Intervention in support of adolescent parents and their children: A final report on the Teen Parents as Teachers Demonstration*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

⁴ Popkin, M.H. (1989). Active Parenting: A video-based program. In M.J. Fine (Ed.), *The second handbook on parent education: Contemporary perspectives* (pp. 77-98). San Diego: Academic Press.

⁵ Bavolek, S.J., Comstock, C.M., & McLaughlin, J.A. (1983). *The nurturing program: A validated approach to reducing dysfunctional family interactions*. Final report, Grant No. 1R01MH34862, Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health.

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