

Implementing parenting education policy to overcome parental stress and foster educational and behavioral competence in children

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It is widely acknowledged that parents play a significant role in the cognitive, social and emotional development of their children. Through their role, parents provide children with socialization to cultural and societal norms and values meant to prepare them for the navigation of the communities in which they live and the needs of the society they will encounter in the future (Miller and Goodnow, 1995). However, although parenting is commonly understood to have important implications for the development of children, families and society (Ary, Duncan, Duncan & Hops, 1999b), it is also one of the few roles that does not require educational training or experience. Moreover, while many parents acknowledge the need for educational resources on effective parenting, most do not receive this valuable information (Prinz & Sanders, 2007).

Educational parenting programs are designed to provide effective parenting strategies aimed at meeting the needs of parents and children (Thomas & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). These programs have been shown to be effective in reducing childhood behavior problems (Bodenmann, Cina, Ledermann & Sanders, 2008) and promoting positive parenting skills (Spoth et al., 2008). However, the availability of these educational programs is limited and many children and parents do not receive the support they need (Foster, Prinz, Sanders & Shapiro, 2008; Prinz & Sanders, 2007). With the growing concern over behavioral disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the current media attention focused on adolescent violence, and taking into account the importance parenting skills play in the academic development of children, the design and accessibility of parenting programs must be addressed.

In this paper, we focus on the efficacy and accessibility of parenting support and education. We will examine research addressing the effects of parenting on children's development, discuss the implications of these effects on society, and review established parenting education programs. The paper will conclude with a brief discussion of policy implications.

Parenting Effects on Educational and Behavioral Competence

Research has shown that negative parenting (Bradley & Corwyn, 2007; Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2007), inconsistent parenting strategies, and permissive parenting (Ary et al, 1999b) can lead to undesirable outcomes in children. These outcomes include behavioral and emotional problems (Foster et al., 2008), externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2007), and decreased cognitive (Hughes & Ensor, 2007) and academic development (Spoth et al., 2008). Additionally, negative parenting

has been implicated in children's poor self-regulation development (Coley, Votruba-Drzal & Schindler, 2008) use of aggression (Ary et al., 1999b), and associated with conduct disorders (Foster et al., 2008) and severe behavioral problems that persist over time (Hughes & Ensor, 2007). All of these factors have been related to the failure of children to succeed in the classroom.

With the understanding that ineffective parenting strategies lead to negative educational outcomes for children, we must understand the factors that lead to ineffective parenting. The most often cited factor in the literature, parenting stress has been shown to lead to harsh (Bradley & Corwyn, 2007) and inconsistent (Ary, Duncan, Biglan, Metxler, Noell & Smolkowski, 1999a) parenting strategies. This finding is significant in that harsh parenting (e.g. yelling, arguing, slapping) has been shown to increase the likelihood of antisocial behaviors while serving as a model for aggressiveness. Further, stressful parenting is associated with decreased warmth, nurturance and support, all of which have been associated with negative outcomes for children (Ary et al., 1999b; Coley et al., 2008; Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008).

While the causes of parenting stress are not adequately addressed, it has been noted that the parenting of children with behavior problems and the presence of family conflict may contribute to parenting stress (Karreman et al, 2008; Levac et al, 2008). Left without support, these ineffective strategies perpetuate a cycle of negativity thereby promoting the development of strained relationships between parents and children. In fact, Joshi & Gutierrez (2006) found that better relationships and communication with adolescents are associated with less stress and improved parental monitoring, which is associated with improved behavior in children. Therefore, addressing parental stress is important for combating the negative outcomes of ineffective parenting.

While most studies have focused on the negative effects of parenting, positive outcomes have also been addressed by researchers. These scholars argue that competent parenting leads to important social-emotional abilities including improved self-regulation, responsible decision making (Spoth et al, 2008), and the ability to regulate negative emotions (Bradley & Corwyn, 2007). Further, competent parenting has been associated with decreased substance abuse and increased academic success (Spoth et al., 2008).

While we have gained a better understanding of how parenting may affect the development of individual children, we must also consider societal effects. Given that each child functions within his/her community, both drawing from and contributing to its development (Miller & Goodnow, 1995), we must understand how the parenting children receive affects the communities in which they live.

The Implications of Ineffective Parenting on Society

The obvious implication for society deals with the behavior evidenced by children of ineffective parents. Displaying deviant and anti-social behaviors (Ary et al., 1999b), these children contribute to patterns of crime and victimization (Foster et al, 2008). Exhibiting poor self-regulation (Bradley & Cormyn, 2007), lower academic competence (Spoth et al., 2008) and higher levels of problematic behavior, adolescents with ineffective parents are more likely to drop out of school, participate in gang activity and spend time in juvenile detention facilities. These children are also more likely to commit minor crimes such as theft and vandalism, contributing to and perpetuating negative social practices.

In addition to the social implications cited above, ineffective parenting may also have economic implications. Through the funding of services such as Child Protective Services (CPS), foster care, and the judicial system, the government and tax payers incur the costs of ineffective parenting. These costs are further extended to treatment charges such as healthcare, mental health services and the increased educational needs of these children (Prinz & Sanders, 2007). Taken together, these costs represent a significant amount of the governmental budget which may otherwise be directed toward other programs.

Given the high costs associated with ineffective parenting, it is important that we begin to address the issue of increasing parenting competencies. As scholars have argued, educational intervention programs may be viewed as a key in doing so (Heider, 2008; Huth-Bock & Hughes, 2007). As Foster and colleagues (2008) state, "Given the enormous costs associated with both child maltreatment and children's behavioral and emotional problems, the savings stemming from effective preventive interventions are potentially quite large" (p. 494). Given this argument, we now turn our attention toward these programs.

Educational Intervention Programs

Researchers addressing parenting effects commonly provide suggestions for intervention programs aimed at improving parenting practices. These programs target parenting practices through education and support groups in an effort to prevent future deviant behaviors in children (Spoth et al, 2008), strengthen parent-child relationships (Joshi & Gutierrez, 2006) and reduce parental stress (Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2007). By teaching parents strategies to manage children's behaviors and modifying their perceptions about children and their parental roles (Lundahl et al., 2008; Thomas et al, 2007), parenting education programs can help to intercept negative trajectories for children, increase competent behavior and promote positive academic development.

In looking at the results of established programs, it is overwhelmingly clear that parental education does contribute to positive parenting practices and child behaviors. The results of these programs include increases in parental self-efficacy and warmth, reduction in parental stress (Thomas & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007) and the maintenance of positive parenting skills over time (Levac et al, 2008). Further, child related benefits include increased academic success, social-emotional skills and the reduction of antisocial behaviors (Spoth, 2008). In addition, intervention programs have been shown to be effective for children with disruptive behavior and conduct disorders (Lundahl, 2008).

The positive effects of parenting education can further be seen in the study conducted by Thomas and Zimmer-Gembeck (2008). Through a meta-analysis design, the authors looked at the effects of two popular parenting programs, the Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) program and the Triple P ; Positive Parenting Program. In their evaluation of 24 studies conducted on these two programs, Thomas and Zimmer-Gembeck found that the programs improved parenting skills and reduced negative child behaviors. From their analysis, these scholars concluded that interventions that include parental education are effective in increasing competent parenting practices.

Although parenting education programs provide important and long-lasting benefits for children and families, inaccessibility and stigmatization limit parental involvement in such programs (Prinz & Sanders, 2007; Ryan et al, 2006). Because most programs are offered by private organizations, parents must qualify in some way for services and must adhere to the guidelines set by these organizations. These programs generally offer little flexibility and are structured in a single format that does not take into account individual preferences or cultural differences (Prinz & Sanders, 2008). Further, while negative parenting practices are not limited to low-income earners (Coley et al, 2008) the overwhelming majority of such programs are targeted at this group. Additionally, the association of these programs with court mandated training following CPS intervention or custody disputes contributes to the stigma surrounding them (Prinz & Sanders, 2008). For these reasons, only a small portion of the population who need these services ever participate (Foster et al, 2008). Failing to address these challenges, the current system of multiple organization-run interventions is insufficient to support the needs of parents and children and warrants further consideration.

Policy Implications

In thinking about policies that may best support the education and development of families and communities, it would appear natural to address the needs of the future, the children. Education programs aimed at the positive development of parenting skills have shown to be an effective vehicle through which to address the positive development of children (Bodenmann et al, 2008; Thomas & Zimmer-Grebeck, 2007). However, while we have argued for the use of parenting education programs, we also assert that the current organization of programs is insufficient to address the global needs of parents. For this reason, we propose that a new centralized system be designed and implemented at federal and state levels. Responsible for providing access to all parents who seek assistance, the implementation of a new parenting education system would necessarily include the creation of a new government office. Through this office, a variety of services and formats may be provided for current, expecting and future parents. With this type of program, the family's culture and specific context could be taken into account, both in trainings and personal supports. Further, because parents need continual support and training rather than a one-time class, this program could provide ongoing research-based support for parents with children of all ages. Topics to be covered may include managing and overcoming stress; guidance and discipline of children; understanding children's developmental levels, abilities, competencies and needs; fostering educational success; understanding parents' and children's educational and legal rights; and the relationship between nutrition and academic and behavioral competence. Service components for delivering this information may include distributing pamphlets and conducting workshops at hospitals, libraries, and in educational settings; a parenting hotline giving parents immediate access to services and resources; and the creation and maintenance of parenting support groups. In making the program available and accessible to all parents it is believed that the stigma and shame will be removed from parenting education and all children may benefit from the support provided. Evidence for a successful program may include lower incidence of child abuse, teacher report of fewer behavior problems, and an increase in parental parenting confidence.

Conclusion

While the development of a centralized parenting education program would require effort and initial financial support, the benefits for society would far outweigh the costs. Currently, many parents are left to their own devices, trying to make sense of their parenting skills alone or relying on the advice of others. Such a program would allow for the dissemination of knowledge learned in research, sensitivity to cultural values and an increasing awareness by parents of the importance their actions and behaviors play in their children's development. Further, by making this type of program available, we are enabling parents to find the resources they need and creating a society which values and supports the needs of its citizens.

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