



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

HOME-BASED PROGRAMMES: EDUCATING PARENTS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS

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Introduction: Parenting Education

Perhaps the fastest growing programme area within the early childhood field is that of parenting, or family, education. This indirect approach to enhancing the total development of infants and young children focuses on what happens to children at home rather than on what happens to them in institutions outside the home.

■ PARENTING EDUCATION COMPLEMENTS A SERVICE DELIVERY STRATEGY

Programmes emphasizing the education of parents and other caregivers complement and reinforce service programmes that provide direct attention to the health, nutrition, and developmental needs of the young child. Parenting education programmes provide encouragement and information, allowing a more effective use of existing services. The main purpose of parent education programmes is to strengthen the self-confidence of parents and empower them with the knowledge and skills that will enhance their own ability to foster the

physical, mental, social, and emotional development in their young child. The encouragement and information parents gain from such programmes, however, can often lead to a more effective use of existing services.

■ PROGRAMMES SHOULD DRAW ON EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

It is important to recognize that many parents, even in so-called disadvantaged environments, are competent and effective caregivers. Their own competence, early socialization, and access to common wisdom provide a basis for childcare and development that is well adapted to the needs of their particular situation. Moreover, the demands of childrearing are often shared with grandparents or other members of an extended family, whose help and valuable insights demonstrate strengths inherent in the traditional culture.

Taking seriously the idea that a rich store of parental competence, knowledge, and experience exists in any community means that parenting education cannot be viewed simply as a process in which outside experts transmit predetermined messages to caregivers who are assumed by the experts to lack knowledge. Rather, parenting education, to be effective, must recognize and support common wisdom and those local practices that foster a child's healthy growth and development.

However, accepting the value of common wisdom should not lead to a naive view that all local practices are, by definition, good. Such a romantic position is not viable in a world in which children increasingly live simultaneously in more than one culture, cultures in which traditional socialization processes and practices are often being distorted by migration, urbanization, and other social and economic pressures. Some age-old child-care wisdom is being lost in the process of change. More important however, is the recognition that practices that may have worked well in a traditional environment do not necessarily work as well under new circumstances. Also, new knowledge about health, nutrition, and development has become available, and this knowledge may not have found its way into the store of common knowledge. Therefore, there is a responsibility for parent educators to provide new knowledge as well as to support and revive traditional childrearing knowledge. The effectiveness of parent educators will depend less on the external transmission of facts than on their ability to promote reflection, strengthen resolve, and provide experiences in which the new knowledge can be applied.

■ WHY PARENTING EDUCATION?

Enhancement of early childhood development by working with parents, whether pursued separately or in conjunction with existing centre- or community-based approaches, is usually justified by one or more of the following arguments:

- ***Building and reinforcing family responsibility.*** In most societies, the family maintains the primary responsibility for raising children. Therefore, programmes of childcare and development should build upon, not undermine, family responsibility (except in the most extreme circumstances). If planners and programmers place emphasis exclusively on the establishment of childcare services and educational institutions, responsibility can shift away from the family to those institutions, sometimes with negative results.

- ***Adding continuity and support to existing service programmes.*** Even when children spend part of their time outside the family at a child care centre, the principal force for socialization continues to be the home. It is in the home that parents and other caregivers can provide, or fail to provide, the immediate intellectual, social, and emotional interaction and support needed for child development, particularly during the first months of life. What happens in the home can support or contradict what occurs in outside service programmes, adding to their effectiveness or rendering them ineffective.
- ***Sustaining improvements over the long term.*** Permanent improvement in the state of development of young children will require changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and childrearing practices of the primary caregivers. These changes however, will not be the result of programmes which only provide direct services to children. On the contrary, the provision of children's services tends to reinforce in primary caregivers a passive, rehabilitative approach rather than an active, preventive one. Parenting education offers a potentially effective way to sustain children's gains in their early development, even if a particular programme or childcare centre disappears.
- ***Promoting an integrated approach to childcare and development.*** Although an integrated approach to early childhood development is reputed to foster development of the total child, it has often proved difficult to bring together in practice the health, nutrition, education, and other services necessary to provide children with the desired multifaceted attention. These diverse components can be brought together more efficiently and effectively in the context of an educational programme than in the delivery of a set of services.
- ***Extending coverage at a reasonable cost.*** Some forms of parenting education lend themselves to broad coverage at a relatively low cost, particularly when compared with the cost of building of centres. Indeed, parenting education for early childhood development is the most feasible low-cost approach to programming on a large scale. A desire to reach more children within the constraints of existing budgets motivates much of the present interest in parenting education.

■ PARENTING EDUCATION TAKES MANY FORMS

This issue of the Notebook No.5 deals with parenting education which is carried out either through the mass media or through programmes providing education to parents who meet in groups outside the home. The home-visiting approach to assisting parents was discussed in the Focus article of Notebook No. 4 and in an accompanying supplement describing various ongoing programmes. In the forthcoming Notebook No. 6, special attention will be given to parenting education provided in Child-to-Child programmes.

Variations on the theme. Parent education can occur in or outside of the home. It can occur on an individual basis or in groups. It may be realized through face-to-face interaction or through long-distance techniques, such as use of the mass media. It may be didactic or based principally on demonstration, observation, and imitation. Parenting education programmes also vary widely in terms of their goals, the underlying theory guiding developmental activities, the contents and materials used, the participants, the training and background of the instructors, and the frequency of the contacts or messages.

A crucial difference: the degree of interpersonal communication. One of the most important differences between parenting education programmes lies in the kind and degree of interpersonal communication they require and promote. Home-visiting programmes, for example, require direct communication and interaction—usually on a one-to-one basis. Group programmes can involve interaction among participants, as well as between the educator and each caregiver. Programmes provided through the mass media usually involve no direct personal contact.

The sections that follow provide a reminder about the home-visiting approach presented previously, then deal with parenting education when linked to the use of mass media (with a heavy emphasis on the impersonal aspect of this type of education). This is followed by examples of parent schools and other group approaches that emphasize interpersonal communication. Potential advantages and weaknesses of these different approaches are discussed.

Home visiting: A reminder

In a home-visiting approach, education occurs through direct personal exchanges and activities which take place during visits to the home. In Notebook No. 4, we noted that home visiting lends itself to direct and meaningful communication about immediate and concrete problems; offers the opportunity to learn in context; allows demonstration and observation followed by practice and immediate feedback; and promotes private, free discussion of problems that might not be discussed in a group setting. We also noted the need for home-visitors to be extraordinarily sensitive, so as not to undermine the position of a parent or other authority figures in the home. Because home visiting is a personalized approach, its cost can seem high in comparison with costs of other forms of parenting education. However, when compared to centre-based approaches, it can be economical.

Parenting Education and the Mass Media

Mass-media approaches to educating parents and other caregivers include the use of print, radio, and television. Although the effectiveness of print is limited where illiteracy is high, pictures and cartoons can also be used effectively to communicate messages. Access to television is increasing in poor urban areas even though this medium is still biased toward reaching the economically and socially favored sectors. Radio has proved to be an effective means of promoting adult education in many locations.

No preferred medium. While there is no naturally preferred mass communication channel, previous work has identified some characteristics of the messages that seem to underlie successful communication efforts. For example, the communications literature suggests that a mass-media approach will more effectively transmit knowledge if the messages are:

- Targeted toward a specific audience
- Sensitive to the abilities, belief structures, and value systems of the intended audience
- Perceived to be of high priority

- Presented in a format which, in avoiding didactic lecturing, incorporates messages into stories and events with everyday significance, using popular language

Mass media alone—ineffective. Parenting education approached exclusively through mass-media campaigns is unlikely to have much effect. Messages may be received and understood to the point that they can be repeated back to an evaluator. There is little guarantee, however, that such messages will significantly change practices or that any changes will persist over time. Experience suggests that changes in attitudes and practices require a form of education that reinforces the individual messages provided through the media with interpersonal forms of communication. Interpersonal exchange helps the interpretation and understanding of these messages, but more important, it provides group support and reinforcement to change practices.

■ A VENEZUELAN EXAMPLE

One of the most noted examples in recent years of the use of mass media for family education comes from Venezuela. Proyecto Familia, begun in 1980, was intended to promote the intellectual development of children from birth to six years of age by providing informal education to mothers, both through direct contact and through mass-media contact. In urban Venezuela, television reaches 96 percent of the population. In the most rural areas, radio reaches more than 80 percent of the population. To take advantage of this coverage and of the existing communications infrastructure, Proyecto Familia produced an impressive number of television and radio programmes and spots, as well as slide presentations and films.

Although the Venezuelan programme has attracted considerable international attention and has produced some very good materials, a 1984 evaluation of the results concluded that, overall, the effort constituted "a promise yet to be fulfilled."¹ Fulfillment was limited in part by the fact that the mass-media messages were not linked to a system of interpersonal contacts. In urban areas, television viewers were able to identify the name Proyecto Familia, but there was no evidence that the approach had changed practices. After an initial run, it became difficult to convince commercial television stations that these messages should be shown. In rural areas, there seemed to be somewhat greater success. Radio messages were better accepted by local stations in search of programme material, and the messages were at least partially linked to a system of interpersonal communication involving both rural extension workers and health personnel in primary health care centres.

Parent Schools and Other Group Approaches

There are many examples of group approaches to parenting education. Most of these have evolved as add-ons to existing health, nutrition, or other social service programmes. Some, however, have begun as independent parenting education programmes.

■ AN INDONESIAN EXAMPLE

In conjunction with the periodic weighing of young children and the distribution of food, mothers participate in group discussion where education occurs through sharing experiences and making and using toys. The Bina Keluarga Balita (BKB) project,² begun in 1982, is an attempt to

add an early childhood education component to the existing structure of services to families. Initiated by the Office of the Associate Ministry for the Role of Women, the parenting education project relies on and receives multisectorial support. The purpose of the project is to enhance the knowledge, awareness, and skills of mothers and other family members, thereby enabling them to provide an appropriate developmental environment for their children under age five. Field workers—women from the community being served—are provided with training in child development and adult education. They then provide workshops for mothers at the nutrition centres. In the workshops, mothers receive child development information, their role as primary educator of the child is emphasized, and they learn about easy activities to do with their children at home. In addition, a toy library provides mothers with toys to take home and use with their children in between workshops.

■ AN EXAMPLE FROM THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

A relatively recent initiative in the People's Republic places new emphasis on the family as an agency of socialization and on the skills of parenting.³ Parent schools (40,000, by one estimate) exist in many communities. These experiments in parenting education seem to have their roots in a concern over the relatively new situation of the one-child family. Most of the parent schools are based in hospitals or attached to kindergarten, primary, or middle schools. In addition, neighborhood committees provide programmes for newlyweds or potential parents. Thus, existing institutions take responsibility for organizing the programmes, in part as a way of strengthening their own relationship with the parents. However, they are helped in their task by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), which has taken the lead in mobilizing communities to establish the parent programmes. While specialists or staff from the local institution provide the lectures, the curriculum, which usually consists of between four and six classes spread over a term, is based on the findings of intersectorial groups brought together by the ACWF to examine research and to define needs of children and parents.

■ A COLOMBIAN EXAMPLE

In a marginal area of Bogota, Colombia, a parenting education programme⁴ was set up as an alternative to home visiting under the explicit assumption that visiting in the home would undermine a mother's position and confidence within her own home. In this parenting education project, mothers (or principal caregivers) met once a week in a community centre, where they received information about health, nutrition, and psychosocial development. An innovative feature of this project was creation of a baby book containing messages from the baby to the mother about developmental accomplishments and about the needs, at particular times, for health check-ups, immunizations, etc. The book, covering the first two years of a child's life, provided a personal record for the child at the same time that it educated the caregivers and served as a basis for discussion at meetings.

Mass Media in Support of Group Education and Mobilization

A more intensive programming effort utilizes a combination of educational approaches and techniques in the effort to enhance parenting skills. Mass media plays a catalytic role in bringing people together and in stimulating discussion.

■ ANOTHER COLOMBIAN EXAMPLE

One of the classic examples of the use of mass media for adult education comes from Colombia and illustrates the importance of providing information in a way that utilizes and promotes interpersonal relationships. Over a period of two decades (the 1940s and 1950s), the Roman Catholic Church successfully developed a system of radio schools called ACPO (standing for Popular Cultural Action).⁵ In its early stages, transmission of the radio messages—covering a variety of themes from religious messages to basic literacy—was directly supported by a system of promoters. In each community these promoters received training in the interpretation of the radio messages and in the use of associated materials provided to the listening groups. The promoters were also responsible for motivating and assembling community members to listen, in a group, to the radio broadcasts, which were beamed to a radio in the community. This system was relatively easy to establish, given the extensive grassroots organization of the Church. With the advent of the transistor radio, however, came unanticipated problems. The transistor allowed more messages to be beamed, on a continual basis, to more people. It was no longer necessary to meet in groups at a fixed time to hear the broadcast. Paradoxically, increased opportunity for exposure seemed to undercut the effectiveness of the programme. The group interpretation and incentive for common action was missing. Indeed, it became necessary to re-institute the groups, this time with a different rationale, and to strengthen the system of promoters who helped give life to the broadcasts.

■ A CHILEAN EXAMPLE

The Padres y Hijos (PPH)⁶ experiment in southern Chile combines long-distance education with a system of local promoters. A private research development centre, working with a local radio station, began the programme in 1979. In fifty communities, families with children between the ages of four and six gather once a week for transmission of a radio broadcast. A discussion led by a local promoter follows the broadcast. Over the course of a year, the broadcasts and discussions treat a series of twelve themes, each designed to be the focus of discussion and activity for a month. At the weekly meetings, the leader presents pictures depicting common incidents from the people's lives which offer opportunities for stimulating children's learning. The leader guides the discussion, focusing on what the picture shows, on what the child is doing developmentally, and on ways parents can support the child's learning in that situation. Parents then talk about activities they can do with the child during the week. Toys are also available.

The success of the PPH programme lies both in the effect it has had on the relationships among people in the community, as well as on its impact on children. The radio broadcasts are used as ways to promote reflection by community groups on problems affecting their children and, not incidentally, themselves. The engendered interpersonal communication led to both

understanding and action. Simply transmitting messages by radio could not have had the same effect.

Observations

The foregoing examples are presented in a brief form and represent a small sample of parenting education programmes. They do not lend themselves easily to generalizations. However, looking at these and at many other programmes, we are led to several general observations about parenting education programmes:

- Although many programmes have been successful in transmitting knowledge about early childhood development, it is apparent that increasing an individual's knowledge base is not sufficient to bring about desired behavior change. In addition to transferring knowledge, programmes must provide interpersonal contacts and organizational structures to reinforce and sustain changes in attitudes and behaviors. The most successful programmes seem to be those that provide information as well as strengthen interpersonal contacts.
- Most parenting education programmes are based on fixed and preconceived messages that do not incorporate the wisdom of traditional practices, even though doing so could increase the effectiveness of the education.
- The many programmes now in existence have produced a wealth of available materials. Those designing programmes should review existing materials, both to learn from past successes and failures and to avoid unnecessary duplication.
- At present there are few systematic evaluations of parenting education programmes which focus on psychosocial development. Most existing evaluations have been carried out on relatively small-scale pilot, or demonstration, projects. To understand and document both the success and failure of such programming efforts, we need evaluations which focus on both processes and outcomes. In the meantime, however, there is a great deal to learn from evaluations of parenting education efforts focussing on health or nutrition.
- Finally, although there are various potential advantages of parenting education programmes, they should not be viewed as a "low-cost" panacea for enhancing child development among children and families in need. The education of parents and other caregivers must be viewed as only one strategy in a larger set of complementary programming strategies designed to improve the physical, mental, and socioemotional development of the young child.

Endnotes

¹ UNICEF, "An Evaluation of Venezuela's Proyecto Familia," New York, UNICEF, Programme Division, November 1984. Mimeo.

² "Getting it Together for Children," UNICEF News, No. 119 (1984), pp. 26-7.

³ "Chinese Parents Go Back to School," People, vol. 14, No. 4 (1987), p. 25.

⁴ Fundacion para la Educacion Permanente en Columbia (FEPEC), Educacion No-Formal y Desarrollo Infantil. Desarrollo Infantil a traves de un Programa de Educacion No-Formal con enfasis en Nutricion, Salud y Estimulacion Psicologic, Bogota, FEPEC/CEDEN, 1979.

⁵ Accion Cultural Popular (ACPO), Conclusions of studies on the effectiveness of radiophonic schools of Accion Cultural Popular, Bogota, Colombia, ACPO, December 1972.

⁶ Howard Richards, The Evaluation of Cultural Action: An Evaluative Study of the Parents and Children Program (PPH). London: MacMillan, 1985.

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