



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

PARENT EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMES

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In the past two decades there has been a resurgence of interest in the role of the family in the care and education of young children. The current attention on families stems largely from several interrelated global trends. Family structures throughout the world continue to change in response to industrialisation, urbanisation, population growth, increasing longevity, and migration. While these changes have created new opportunities, they have also disrupted familiar cultural practices and survival patterns that families have developed over the years to cope with their multiple responsibilities. One aspect of life affected by these trends is the ability of the family to provide optimal childrearing environments in the context of widespread changes in the social fabric of families, neighbourhoods, and communities. Adding to this concern is increased recognition of families' major influence on young children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

As a consequence of these changes, among all those concerned with the development of children and families, there is an increased demand for high-quality, community-based childcare services. As a complementary rather than alternative strategy to the direct provision of high-quality child care programmes, this proposal highlights the potential benefits resulting from programmes designed to educate parents and other caregivers in ways that enhance their care and interaction

with the child and enrich the immediate environment. The following discussion sets forth a rationale for working with parents, outlines the basic childrearing tools required by caregivers, and reviews the range of available strategies for providing parents and families access to this information.

Parent Education: A Rationale

Educators have long acknowledged the significant influence of the family on the care and development of the child and the tremendous cultural and familial differences in parent-child patterns of interaction. Research on parent-child interaction underscores differences in the abilities of parents to teach their own children effectively. For example, the realisation that some parental teaching styles, language interaction, and cognitive expectations are not conducive to providing the "optimal learning environment" has stimulated methods to enrich parent-child learning interactions. Thus, recognition of the family as the child's primary socialising agent has been accompanied by periodic calls for monitoring parental performance and by recommendations for providing parents with childrearing information and guidance.

Acknowledgement of the family's role as a major socialisation force has also contributed to the notion that if the positive benefits to the child are to be maintained over time, experience in child development programmes must be reinforced at home. Thus, a second stream feeding the current efforts to involve parents in their children's learning stems from the undisputed failure of almost all intervention programmes without such involvement to sustain the considerable cognitive gains demonstrated during the child's participation in such programmes. Failure to maintain cognitive gains from programmes with minimal parental involvement has been found regardless of the theoretical orientation or intensity of the programme. The conviction that parent involvement remains an indispensable ingredient for sustaining the accomplishments of early child education programmes has led to the conviction that to work with children alone is to invite failure and frustration.

In light of this perspective, it is apparent that a comprehensive redefinition of early education is critical. Such a redefinition leads to a major new objective for professional educators, in order to influence the child's education in the home, in the community, and through the mass media from birth throughout childhood. *"This objective would require that educators involve themselves in training parents and future parents in family care and education skills. ... The ability of the family to care for and educate the child is weakened by stresses and strengthened by support from neighbours, friends, relatives, social groups, and relevant professionals. ... If the education profession could develop new roles they might provide training and experience in childcare and education to future parents throughout the period of school attendance and also provide methods, material, training and consultation to parents of school-age children. Training and support for family care and education of the child before school entrance might be provided by health personnel, by educators, or by a new discipline. Ideally, professional education will provide support for family education of the child. ... Schools are necessary but not sufficient for the education of the child."*

Basic Child Development Tools: A Parent's Right

Since the responsibility for determining the child's best interest rests first and foremost with parents, the doctrine of parental rights is a fundamental premise of parent-education efforts. Some of the basic childrearing tools are listed below.

Knowledge about child development. Parents need knowledge about how children develop. Children's normative patterns and stages in physical, social, and language development, as well as their nutritional and health needs at these stages, should be part of the knowledge base for parenthood. Knowledge of children's emotional needs and typical early social-emotional behaviours may similarly forestall inappropriate parental responses to their emotions and behaviours. Understanding the patterns and processes of early cognitive development could help parents to develop more realistic expectations of the stages of development and the prior skills required for more mature competencies.

Observation skills and more effective parenting. A basic need of all parents, regardless of socio-economic status or educational level, is to learn how to observe a young child. Informal child-watching can help one understand a child's level of development in relation to what one would like a young child to learn or accomplish. In essence, parents need information and observation skills to help them discover the match between a child's ability or readiness and some ways and means to help the child achieve a given developmental goal. Such awareness can help a parent to handle a child's daily frustrations more skilfully.

Alternative strategies for problem prevention and discipline. Parents need insights for managing child behaviours. Knowledge and skills regarding alternative methods of discipline and problem avoidance are basic childrearing tools. Knowing how to implement a variety of positive rewards can help a child to enjoy more fully both the exploration and the struggles required in mastering new skills.

How to use home for learning experiences. Another basic tool consists in knowing how to take advantage of settings, routines, and activities in the home to create learning and problem-solving opportunities. Parents of young children need to know ways of turning household objects into learning materials for children's exploration.

Parents need language tools. How does a parent respond to a baby's unintelligible babbling and misshapen early words or simplify explanations to make sense of the world for a preschool child? How does a parent ensure that words are not used mainly to give orders or express irritation? The parent who has learned to give names to the things a child notices, to the actions a child carries out, and to the feelings a child expresses has a powerful tool for enhancing the child's language skills.

Parents need support. Most of all, parents need to understand the tremendous impact they have on their children's lives. Through their attention, expressed pleasure, listening, and interest, the child's growing sense of self is nourished just as his or her body is nourished through food.

Moreover, the opportunity for parents to find pleasure and interest in their relationships with their own and other children should be understood and clarified.

HEAD START: A PROMISING MODEL FOR INVOLVING PARENTS IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

The *Head Start Programme*, a governmental programme launched in the United States in 1965, is a comprehensive early childhood programme committed to involving parents in the education of their children. Targeting four-year-old children and their families, the programme was initially designed as a compensatory programme that would provide enriching experiences and would enable the children to compete with their middle-class peers in kindergartens and elementary schools. Since its inception, Head Start has proved to be one of the most successful programmes of the "War On Poverty Initiative", and it is based on two main principles: first, that children benefit from interdisciplinary programmes to foster their development and remedy their problems and, second, that the entire family and community must be involved in the child's learning development. In Table 1 is a description of the different roles parents can play in Head Start and the benefits for the parent and child.

TABLE 1
THE FOUR ROLES OF PARENTS

	<i>Decision-Makers</i>	<i>Volunteers</i>	<i>Planners</i>	<i>Partners</i>
<i>What</i>	Making policy decisions in the programme	Participating in the programme and classroom	Planning workshops, projects, and events	Linking the centre to the home
<i>How</i>	Through: Centre committee Policy committee State, regional and national associations	Through: Classroom visits Parent Meetings Volunteer Work Employment	In: Community action Health and safety Career development Education and training	Through: Home visits by teachers, family-service workers, nurses, etc. Newsletters, menus, information, and materials from the centre to be used at home

<i>Why</i>	Parents need to show their children a style of life that is responsible and committed.	Parents need to be actively involved in the world of <i>Head Start</i> .	Parents need to be actively learning and discovering new ideas to improve their lives, their children's schools, and their community.	Parents need to recognise their children's <i>Head Start</i> accomplishments and support more growth.
	Children need to see their parents' concern about their world.	Children can take pride in their parents' activities in the programme.	Children can see their parents also learning while performing activities to improve their lives.	Children can see that their whole family is involved and interested in <i>Head Start</i> friends, activities, and experiences.

Parent-Education: Programmes and Strategies

Programmes designed to promote parent involvement, education, and support can be examined in relation to their type, their format, and their goals and objectives. A programme's degree of parental participation, its location (home, community, school), and its overall theoretical perspective are also useful dimensions for describing the formal relationships between parents and other child care providers. In this section, general programme types will be presented along with the content area they most often address.

General parent-education. The delivery of information and childrearing advice on a wide range of topics characterises general parent-education programmes. Child development, behaviour, learning, and care guidelines are often presented during group meetings. Media materials, such as books, magazines, newspapers, films, and television, can be placed in this category, since their goal is to provide parents with information and advice. General parent-education is expected to enhance children's development and behaviour. The assumption is that an informed parent can respond more skilfully than an uninformed parent can to the range of child-rearing activities and responsibilities.

While the specific content of general parent-education programmes varies widely, fostering the child's physical wellbeing and normal development tend to be the predominant themes. In social service settings, family relationships within and outside of the home are usually emphasised along with role responsibilities, cultural differences in childrearing patterns, and appropriate use of community services. By far, the predominant sources of general parent-education information and advice are mental health authorities. Mental health and learning-oriented programmes frequently include a focus on the child, family, and school-related behaviour, as well as on the early identification of problems and the techniques for managing children's needs. The normal

developmental milestones and sequences of growth are often presented. Detailed exercises might be outlined for improving parents' abilities to deal with behaviour and learning. Such programmes have focused on communication, intelligence, values, problem solving, behaviour control, and parent-child interaction.

General parent-education, then, is characterised by efforts to advise, teach, and inform parents and other primary caregivers. The populations served by these programmes may vary considerably—high school students, special groups of teen-aged mothers, high-risk parents, parents' groups for schools for the handicapped, new parent-groups, participants of community projects.

Parent training. Sometimes the child or parent needs to gain detailed information and clearly defined experience and skills. It may be that an infant must be physically handled in a particular way, that a family wishes to know exactly how to teach a set of skills, or that a mother will benefit from seeing modelled some specific language and social interactions that will help her baby learn and develop normally. Typically, parent-training programmes are more focused and formal than those of general parent-education. Parent-training programmes contain a series of instruction goals and procedures and are usually conducted by trained professionals. In each case, the curriculum content makes it distinctly different from general parent-education.

Special education programmes have recently placed a great deal of emphasis on building parents' abilities to handle their handicapped infants and toddlers within their first year of life. Such early intervention is thought to prevent or reduce the degree of later difficulties that can be the cumulative effect of early medical problems, developmental delays, physical deficiencies, and non-stimulating environments. In this type of programme, parents are taught how to hold and feed their child, how to create learning activities, and how to work with professionals. Training programmes are critical to prevent the problems resulting from risk factors that have been identified as effecting early development. These factors include premature birth, illness, malnutrition, parenting failures, maltreatment, and stressful home environments.

Parent participation and observation. Parents have assumed responsibilities in the daily activities of many early child development programmes. For example, they may participate as assistant teachers or volunteers, or they may observe the programme directly or through meetings and newsletters. The distinguishing characteristic of this kind formal or informal parent involvement is that families are the direct participants and observers in the programme. They contribute in some way to the child's school experiences and see firsthand the child's activities, environment, and relationships. From this involvement, parents often become familiar with teachers, learning objectives, activities, and policies.

Parents as policy-makers and advisors. Parent boards are one example of how parents can participate in the design and implementation of early child development programmes. In some programmes, parents are involved in staff selection, financial management, evaluation, and curriculum design. Parents' role as "policy-makers" is considered by many to be at the highest level of parent/school relationships. Family members who formally provide advice or influence programme administration through committees fall into this category. Educating parents

regarding their roles as advisors and policy-makers is a broader goal than educating them regarding general information or specific skills. Parents learn to deal with schools as systems and with programmes in terms of what they are seeking to achieve across several years of education. Such insights are quite important if schools are to be responsive to the real needs of children and families growing up in a particular time and place, with a set of cultural norms and priorities.

Parents as home-school liaisons. Perhaps the most traditional view of family-school relationships is that in which parents function as liaisons between the child and programme. They interpret and in some cases help to maintain goals and activities the child has experienced. They provide a communication link between home and school, teacher and child, society and family. As they fulfil this role, parents become informed and experienced in managing the relationships that directly benefit the child. They learn to examine the needs and priorities of each and to determine how to help one or the other in achieving particular goals. The teacher who, at a conference, points out the child's interest in counting, and the parent who informs a director about the child's previous school experience, are maintaining the continuity between home and school that sustains and supports the educational process.

General Parent-support Programmes

The orientation of this approach to parent education is towards helping families to provide stable, nurturing, and healthy environments for children. Parent-to-Parent materials are particularly important as resources for mothers and fathers in the ongoing tasks and challenges of parenthood. Information shared among parents provides them with emotional and social support as they, in turn, help their children to grow and learn. Parents come to feel that they are not rearing their children in isolation, that there are people and programmes to which they can turn for information, and for a shared sense of the challenges and satisfactions surrounding child and family development.

Whether or not they include a formal set of parent-oriented activities, childcare programmes are an example of parent support. Families rely on early child development programmes for a variety of child and family assistance. This might include, for example, health care guidelines and advice on child learning and behaviour. Centres are meeting places for mothers and fathers and provide a peer group for children. The children's centre thus provides parent support as a by-product of its childcare and educational role. Staff members can expand this function by arranging for parents to meet regularly with one another or to utilise resources that keep them informed about common interests.

Summary

The challenges inherent in the design and implementation of successful parent-education programmes should not underestimate the rapid changes occurring in the past two decades in the world's societies. Major transformations at the structural, cultural, and economic levels have had a great impact on women, men, children, families, and communities. Although the themes of partnership and family support are not new to the field of early childhood, current family

arrangements, functions, and roles present challenges not previously addressed. Time available to families for nurturing their children has diminished, and economic pressures on families cause children to receive inadequate care and to be placed in non-family environments at earlier ages. Furthermore, much more is known about the patterns and critical periods of early learning and the quality of the environment required to foster children's development. Thus the need for a range of supportive child development programmes and activities is no longer questioned.

In spite of continuous change, children are still being raised in families, communities, childcare programmes, and schools. Caregivers in this setting are responsible for meeting children's developmental needs and preparing them for a future in society. In the early years, from birth through the lower primary grades, children's social, emotional, and physical learning requirements are managed by parents, with supportive efforts from professionals. Each contributes to the understanding and skills of the other, making parent education one of the most fascinating specialities in early childhood and primary education. There is a belief in the potential of the early years as a time when families can aid the developmental and educational processes. We have come to a turning point in our work with families and children, and programmes can make a significant contribution to the child's growth, learning, and development and to the family's functioning.

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C. : World Bank, 1999.