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ABSTRACT

In this booklet the importance of parent education as a preventive strategy for child abuse is discussed. Many individual differences exist in the area of needs, strengths, and weaknesses related to effective child-rearing and parental competencies. Program goals for parent education would emphasize the following: (1) a primary concern for strengthening the family unit that recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of relationships, needs, and unique goals; (2) public recognition and acknowledgment of the complexity and importance of the parenting role to our present society and future survival; (3) development of strategies that would involve parents in the process of specifying goals and objectives relevant to them, their children, and their hopes and aspirations; (4) development of materials that are directed to social and emotional goals for children and parents as well as the somewhat narrower school-related goals and concerns; (5) developing training programs for personnel that take into account appropriate strategies for working with families, adults as well as children; and (6) developing strategies that would facilitate the coordination and full utilization of all existing delivery systems for parent education. (JD)

EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD

A Primary Prevention Strategy for Child Abuse and Neglect

Child Abuse Project
Education Commission of the States

Report No. 93
December 1976

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PREFACE

Citizens and professionals alike have advocated better parenting skills and attitudes to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. This paper is an attempt to integrate what is presently known and believed about education for parenthood and the maltreatment of children.

This paper was written by Oralie McAfee, Metropolitan State College, Denver, Colorado and Dr. Shari Nedler, University of Colorado. The Education Commission of the States and the Child Abuse and Neglect Project are extremely grateful to the authors for their outstanding efforts.

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I. INTRODUCTION: A PREVENTION STRATEGY

The identification and treatment of child abuse and neglect have received increasing attention since the "battered child" (Kempe, 1960) was first brought to national attention in the 1960s. With strong federal and state support, a variety of research, demonstration and action programs have been mounted to identify underlying causes and correlates of abuse and neglect, educate the public and professionals concerning the nature of the problems, and deliver direct services to abused children and their families. Yet little progress seems to have been made in preventing the problem—the circumstance that everyone desires. It is time that serious consideration be given to a possible way to enhance the quality of life for adults and children in families—and to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Child Abuse

Although child abuse and neglect have multiple manifestations, there seem to be several commonalities. According to Kline (1975), child abuse has three distinguishing attributes: the abused is (1) under the age of 18, (2) under the charge of a caretaker and (3) has suffered nonaccidental physical or psychological injury. Neglect is a more difficult concept to define. It is found where there is an "absence or lack of adequate mothering functions" (Martin & Beezley, 1974) and can be both physical and emotional. The child who is both abused and neglected is particularly vulnerable.

Much attention has been directed to the child victims of this tragic syndrome, and parallel concern for their caretakers—biological parents, foster and adoptive parents, and surrogate parents—began early and has continued. Many approaches have been used to help the abusing adults and innocent children caught in this tragic syndrome. These approaches include removal of the child from the home, provision of necessary social and psychological services, imprisonment, "parents anonymous," group and individual psychotherapy, relieving stressful living conditions and others. The

approach recommended here is parent education as a strategy to prevent child abuse from occurring.

Parent Education

Parent education includes any type of educational program, involvement or intervention designed to increase parental competence and self-esteem in the parenting role. Organized efforts to educate parents are not new in this country, but until the 1960s did not reach any significant number of parents. At that time, the rapid expansion of special programs for children from low-income families was accompanied by a wide variety of involvement and education programs for parents of those children. Most of those involvement efforts concentrated on the parents' roles as teachers of their children, rather than attempting to address the more basic tasks of child rearing, even though child-rearing problems inevitably entered in. As a result of these and other parent education and involvement programs, there is increased emphasis on the need for and the potential of parent education to enhance the quality of daily living for families and children. It is only logical to consider what parent education in its many forms might do to alleviate the vexing problems of child abuse, including preventing it from occurring.

Prevention

Prevention as a strategy for reducing social problems is much less clear-cut than with medical problems such as smallpox, polio or even heart disease. The concept of prevention in human services includes primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, all of which have technical definitions. Basically, primary prevention is concerned with warding off problems before they have happened. The other efforts come "after the fact" and combine treatment with efforts to prevent future problems.

Primary prevention attempts to reach large numbers of people in an attack on the causes of a problem known or assumed to be operating in the general population. If these causes are not clearly understood, as is often the case, primary prevention is usually based on an eclectic theory or theories of causes. While complete and definite knowledge of causes is certainly desirable, prevention programs can be begun without such knowledge. Interrupting the chain of causal events at some point can result in a reduction of the incidence of problems (Daniel, 1975). Although by definition there

are no identified clients or victims of primary prevention programs, there may be high-risk groups where a greater incidence of the problem is expected.

Parent education appears to be a promising strategy for a primary prevention attack on child abuse. It can be developed to reach a broad general population with special emphasis on any specified, high-risk population. There is a substantial, although incomplete, body of knowledge concerning both the delivery and content of parent education. Approaches can be developed to change knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to both specific and general factors of child abuse. An example of a specific factor would be unrealistic expectations of young children's behavior or lack of knowledge of discipline techniques other than physical punishment. General factors would involve such things as improving the quality of family life, coping mechanisms and an understanding of interpersonal relations.

Parent education can also be made available at a number of different points in human development—to adolescents in and out of school, to pregnant women and their families, to foster and adoptive parents before placing children in their care, and to parents at critical points in the child's and family's ongoing development.

In addition, parent education can be targeted to the parent-child interaction system. It is this system, with its complex reciprocal interactions, that is critical in children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. It is this system that affects parents' abilities to enjoy and guide their children in mutually satisfying ways. It is this system that is being identified as a critical factor in the child-rearing process, with special implications for child abuse. Some children are difficult for some adults to "get along" with, some children and parents provoke each other, sometimes there is insufficient bonding and attachment; any or all of these conditions can cause the parent-child interaction system to go awry.

II. RATIONALE FOR PARENT EDUCATION

Abuse is not an isolated physical trauma, but a syndrome of altered and abnormal parent-child interactions that causes devastating damage to the victim – the abused child.

Martin & Beezley, 1974, p. 76

Families, parents and children exist as part of a larger social system, which has tremendous impact upon the flexible, relatively unprotected family unit. Society has been changing rapidly, and so have families. Some of the indicators of social change are:

- 60 percent of American families are metropolitan residents.
- Many families move frequently, both short and long distances.
- Families are having fewer children. The average household size in 1974 was 2.97 persons. In 1973 the live birth rate in the United States was the lowest in history.
- The number of single-parent families is increasing, both because of divorce and because the parents never married.
- Over 50 percent of all women are in the labor force; over 30 percent of all women with children under 6 work out of the home.
- Stable, multi-age communities and the extended family have been replaced by communities linked by interests, age and income level.
- Child bearing among young adolescents seems to be increasing. In our society these young people have had little or no exposure to young children and even less to how to rear children.

These and other changes in the structure of our society have been accompanied by changes—and sometimes breakdowns—in the fulfillment of two basic functions of any society: (1) the way children are reared and (2) the way parents and future parents learn about rearing children—that is, how people learn to be parents. These two functions are related but slightly different. Some examples will clarify the distinction.

Caring for, socializing and educating children can be done in many ways, but in the United States this task has been primarily the family's, either the child's biological parents or other relatives. At the present time, other child-rearing patterns are being developed.

- Many children are cared for out of the home for part of the day. Some are simply left alone. The babysitter and day care center are as much a part of many American families as grandmother and aunt used to be.
- Child-rearing help and support from a supportive spouse or other family member are not available to many parents. Isolation and frustration may result, with no one to take over and to provide some relief.
- Because divorce is usually a transition period between marriages, many children relate to two or more sets of parents, sometimes in quite informal arrangements.
- Cultural and religious constraints on behavior, many of which affect child rearing, are looser—such as, for example, what one eats and the manner in which family meals are provided. Physical punishment and control of children is generally sanctioned in our society (Gil, 1973). The constraints that keep this violent tendency within the bounds of physical safety seem to be less rigid, perhaps reflecting the increase in violence in our total society.
- Technological devices for which no norms have been developed have been incorporated into child rearing and family patterns in sometimes deleterious ways. Television is probably the most obvious example of this.
- Men have gradually been excluded from the child-rearing process. There is little or no research related to the role of the male in child rearing, yet there is a high involvement rate in child abuse for fathers and stepfathers.

Related to patterns of child nurture and education, yet slightly different, is the way our society teaches its future and neophyte parents how to care for their children. Some indicators of change in this important social function:

- The three-person method of learning how to care for a dependent—as when a parent, involved in another task, tutors and guides an older child in the care of a younger—is seldom found. Smaller families and a mobile society result in fewer younger siblings and nearby cousins to practice on.
- Grandparents, aunts and experienced neighbors are not available for advice and for models.
- The idyllic and unrealistic images of family life and child rearing projected by television and other mass media do not correspond to daily living in a family.
- Information and advice to parents seldom takes into account the high emotional content and stress associated with many child-rearing problems. These rational and logical approaches bear little relationship to the stress and strain of child rearing.

Ironically, these social changes related to family life and child rearing have come at a time when research and theory have firmly established the importance of the family and children's early caretakers to their optimal development.

Major Research Finding

Recognition of the critical role of the family in shaping the physical, cognitive and affective development of the child is not a recent phenomena. Reflections on the nature of the child and the relationships between family and child rearing can be found in the writings of Aristotle, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and many others. Questions regarding the nature of the child were part of a larger debate on the nature of man, whether inherently good or inherently evil. Admonitions to parents fluctuated from punitive to permissive depending upon one's philosophical orientation. This debate influenced the development of many different kinds of educational programs for young children, which have ranged from traditional to more open approaches.

In the United States, the child development movement reflects uneven cycles of intense interest in the family and the young child contrasted with periods of minimal intervention. Historically, the impetus for activity has come from the concern and support of private foundations and the federal government. Federal support and directives have been tied to social and economic events such as the Great Depression, World War II and efforts

beginning in the 1960s to promote equal educational and employment opportunities.

Coleman (1966) and more recently Hess (1969) and Jencks (1972) have examined the relationship of the family to progress in formal schooling. Each of these writers points to the pervasive influence of the family in determining education outcomes for young children. If one accepts a broad definition of education outcomes to include social and emotional as well as cognitive growth, then home-school linkages must be addressed if we are to deal adequately with the complexity of optimizing conditions supportive of the child's development. Research in this area appears to support early educational involvement of parents in programs that teach effective child-rearing techniques.

Prior to the 1950s, the theories used to develop ideas about child rearing, particularly those in the psychoanalytic tradition, were typically developed not by observing and studying children, but by extrapolating from studies of neurotic and psychotic adults. In contrast, the work of Arnold Gesell and his colleagues (Gesell, et al., 1940) focused primarily upon development in physical and psychomotor areas, which are largely or totally under the control of physical maturation. These investigators gave less attention to child development in the cognitive and social-emotional areas; when they did write about these areas, the effect was to discourage the development of child-rearing principles that suggested active participation by parents. The heavy maturational bias of Gesell and his colleagues led them to suggest to parents that children go through a series of innate maturational stages regardless of parental behavior. A major implication of this position was that since child development is largely a matter of the unfolding of innate maturation stages, the role of the parent should be confined to knowing about and passively watching and reacting to the child's behavior during these stages.

The American behavioristic tradition was in direct contradiction to this maturational way of thinking about child rearing. The work of the early behaviorists opened up the possibilities for seeing the child as *much more* responsive to environmental differences than had

been believed previously and, therefore, more responsive to the influences of differing child-rearing practices. Recent work has shown that the young child is more malleable and open to environmental influence than had previously been believed (White, 1975; Heber, et al., 1972).

A number of researchers have examined the effects of early deprivation of development through studies of nutrition, cognitive growth and social and emotional factors, among others. The conclusions that can be drawn from these studies (Skeels and Dye, 1939; Skeels, 1966; Spitz, 1945; Kagan, 1972), indicate that extreme deprivation negatively and dramatically affects the developmental cycle. If, however, the conditions of deprivation are removed, the effects appear to be reversible.

Most of the information that exists on child development and child rearing has been collected during the past 20 years, and an impressive data base is now available for beginning to draw practical, applicable implications about child rearing. A survey of this research includes studies that relate parent behaviors to such child outcomes as intelligence, school achievement, motivation, aggression and hostility, affiliation and sociability, sex stereotyping and sex-role learning and self-esteem. Although there are many biologically determined trait differences, such as activity levels and temperament, it is becoming increasingly clear that many cognitive and affective child traits are partially or predominantly shaped by the people, objects and events in a child's environment, not by genetically determined innate structures. While the newborn infant is certainly not a "blank slate" as early behaviorists thought him to be, voluminous data exist at present to show that his cognitive development (to some degree) and his social-emotional development (almost completely) are heavily dependent upon the child's formative experience, especially the attitudes and behavior of his parents.

Developmental Needs: Parent-Child System

Bronfenbrenner (1974[c]), in a major review of the effects of parent-intervention programs targeted for children under the age of 6, suggests the focus of efforts should be neither the child nor the parent but the parent-child system. Although child rearing is a signifi-

cant task for adults in any society, few parents in this country have received systematic instruction to prepare them for the task or to help them carry it out effectively. Most parents undertake this new role with naive expectations and limited knowledge about the normal stages of child development. Consequently, many of the child-rearing strategies they use are purely survival techniques that "get them through the day" but work against the development of consistently appropriate interaction skills. Easy access to relevant information is rarely available, forcing parents to deal with fragmented day-to-day events rather than the totality of the parent-child interaction system.

Essential to the role of "parent" is basic information and knowledge about children. All children move through a series of developmental stages. Key events, milestones and crises that represent normal and expected child behaviors necessary for healthy growth have been identified by researchers. For example, the "lie" or "bragging" behavior of a 4-year-old must be viewed quite differently than this same behavior in a 12-year-old. The 4-year-old is testing reality and attempting to decipher the "rules" of his social environment while the 12-year-old's behavior clearly reflects inadequate coping mechanisms. Unfortunately, parents often equate these two events that occur at different stages of development and deal with them in identical ways. Access to information that generalizes clearly to child behavior at different developmental levels has yet to be systematically provided to parents.

We know that a child's self-concept, his sense of confidence and self-esteem are shaped very early. The home plays a major role in influencing the development of basic values and attitudes toward aggression, hostility and violence as well as the development of a sense of responsibility. The ideal parent might be described as one who has learned self-regulation, makes his own choices, has learned to exercise freedom in responsible ways and can get along in the world. He understands right from wrong, demonstrates self-control, is considerate of others, has developed coping skills that are effective in social relationships and can help a child feel good about himself.

Research results (Goodson and Hess, 1975) indicate that significant positive changes in parent attitudes and behaviors can occur. These include the development of a sense of personal control over one's own life, acquiring more realistic and flexible expectations about children's development, increasing the level of social responsiveness of the parent to the child as well as increasing parent initiative in gaining new skills or positions in the community. These findings indicate that parental attitudes and behavior can be changed through education and involvement.

The critical impact of the parent-child system on the child's development is clearly supported by this same research evidence. When the system operates effectively, development proceeds normally within the context of a supportive environment. The natural resiliency of children fortunately does not require "perfection" in every area of parental interaction. However, when minimal support in the social-emotional domain is absent (an area of development almost totally dependent upon the attitudes and behavior of parents), negative developmental effects can be predicted for the child. Unfortunately, most of the materials developed for parents are oriented toward academic rather than social-emotional goals. If parent education is to be a viable strategy for prevention of child abuse, the focus of the approach must address those social and emotional factors critical to the parent-child system much more strongly than the cognitive aspects of that relationship.

III. PARENT EDUCATION: THE CURRENT STATUS

Parent education, participation, involvement and intervention are broad terms that encompass a variety of approaches to assisting parents with child rearing. Although there are infinite variations, most programs can be grouped into four broad types (Goodson & Hess, 1975):

1. Parents as policy makers.
2. Parents as more effective teachers of their own children.
3. Parents as supporting resources for the school, center or other institution.
4. Parents as better parents.

Each of these concepts of parent participation represents an approach that has been used primarily with low-income families in government or foundation-sponsored programs.

One of the assumed outcomes of *policy making by parents* is an increased sense of control over their children's lives, as well as over social institutions. Programs that emphasize *parents as teachers of their own children* attempt to develop in parents those behaviors that will support children's cognitive and social development, particularly as it relates to school adjustment and achievement. Using *parents as supporting resources* is a more general approach aimed at promoting a positive spirit and involvement with whatever program the sponsoring agency is providing for the children. Programs designed to produce *better parents* who know what things promote their children's growth and development assume that this knowledge and information affect child-rearing practices. Preparenting programs—for junior high and high school students—usually concentrate on the "better parents" approach, often in conjunction with working with young children in group settings.

Although all these approaches have elements that relate to parent education as a preventive for child

abuse, research findings indicate that helping parents in their roles as parents seems to have the most promise. In some cases, portions of the other approaches may be included as necessary to the parenting role. A closer examination of educating parents and future parents to rear children follows.

Past Assumptions and Emerging Patterns

Organized parent education in the 1960s was directed primarily toward low-income groups. Certain assumptions were usually made by the developers of these programs: first, that homes in low-income areas often do not prepare children for later developmental and school-related tasks the way a middle-income home does; second, that the impact of the home and family is seldom changed by other social institutions; and third, that the early years are crucial for the child's later development (Goodson and Hess, 1975).

Within these basic program assumptions, there were several other assumptions pertaining to implementation. Some of these were that the child-rearing practices and values of the dominant group should be the norm for all groups; that professionals could specify goals and procedures from research and theory alone; that needs of a specific target group could be specified without direct involvement with that group; that general information on children's growth, development and education would somehow translate into child-rearing practices; and that all parents were equally motivated to nurture children in the recommended ways.

These assumptions have undergone considerable modification as experience and information have accumulated. Several modified patterns of parent education seem to be emerging. The interaction between parents and professionals is moving toward a reciprocal relationship rather than a relationship that assumes professionals have all necessary knowledge and skill. This changing relationship has been manifested in a number of ways as professionals become facilitators rather than interveners.

- Assessments of the needs of children and parents are being done. These are designed to make programs more responsive to both perceived and actual needs of families.

- Parental and cultural goals and values are given greater credence and respect, with professionals more likely to help achieve goals than to set the goals themselves.
- Efforts are more likely to emphasize and build upon strengths of a family and community rather than emphasize deficits and weaknesses.
- Family and cultural differences from those of the dominant group are less likely to be perceived as inadequacies.
- Parents are increasingly involved in decision making, both to make programs responsive to local needs and to decrease parents' sense of powerlessness.
- Motivation to increase competency as a parent is recognized as a complex but critical element in parenting programs. Providing access to information is seldom sufficient.
- Different families have differing needs in level of support, knowledge and skills required and responsiveness to various approaches and deliveries. There are some beginning efforts to "match" needs and services.
- Direct training in relevant and specific child-rearing skills rather than more general approaches is an emerging trend. These often focus on core skills that can be varied according to family and cultural preferences.
- Education is being targeted toward all who assume a parenting function—foster parents, grandparents, older brothers and sisters, and child care personnel.
- There is beginning to be a recognition of the long-range and sustained nature of any parent education efforts.

These and other emerging patterns indicate a possible overall change in emphasis in parent education: "strengthening the family" rather than simply preparing the child for school.

Exactly how all this is to be accomplished within the framework of the many formal and informal human service systems that exist in the United States is far from clear. Yet support for parent education and involvement efforts seems to be growing. Public Law 94-142, relating to education of handicapped children, recognizes the importance of involving parents and

community in determining desired outcomes, preferred delivery systems and monitoring progress.

Doing this allows for consideration of a wide variety of alternative approaches, each of which may be effective in reaching the desired goals. For example, in considering how parent education will be delivered, one must look at television, radio and other mass media, churches, public schools, peer groups, community agencies and organizations, cultural groups and so forth. Such flexibility is essential in an open society such as ours and with a topic as critical as strengthening and supporting the family in its task of rearing the next generation.

IV. THE PARENT-CHILD SYSTEM

Many factors must be examined in considering parent education as a prevention strategy for child abuse. The possible causes of abuse (which have been only tentatively identified) could lie outside the realm of preventive parent education and therefore are not amenable to treatment by this strategy alone.

Some of these factors as identified by Gil (1970) include society's permissive attitudes toward physical force by caretakers, chance circumstances surrounding disciplinary measures, environmental stress factors that weaken self-control and promote aggression, and organismic defects among children and care givers. Economic stress has also been identified as a primary causal factor.

Bronfenbrenner (1974[a][b]) relates child abuse to the degree to which social support systems exist and operate for parents. Accordingly, child abuse can occur as a function of the degree to which the human ecology enhances or undermines parenting.

Garbarino (1976), in a study designed to explore selected features of this ecological model, suggests that efforts be made to deal with support systems provided for mothers. These efforts could include income supports to relieve severe stress, child care services to provide relief from the pressures of the parenting role and educational development opportunities for the parent. He says (pp. 178-179) that where the human ecology provides adequate support, child abuse is minimized; where support is inadequate and stress great, the "personality" and "cultural" factors cited by Gil are manifested in child abuse.

The complexity of the dynamics of child abuse argues strongly for multidimensional solution strategies. A continuum of intervention models ranging from minimal to maximum levels of involvement should be examined. Strategies must be matched to profiles of individual

needs. Where economic stress is present along with marital instability and isolation, intensive resources will be necessary. When the basic problem is isolation, other strategies and fewer resources might be appropriate. While multiple solutions are often implemented on an ad hoc-basis, rarely is evidence collected to support the effectiveness of one solution as compared to another for specific target groups. Yet this information is needed to guide future efforts. Global reports do not contribute to the systematic improvement of intervention strategies.

The stages at which intervention is planned have a direct relationship to the specification of goals and objectives. The primary target of the intervention strategy moves successively from maximal adult involvement to child/adolescent involvement. During infancy and the preschool years, the adult in the child's environment is almost totally in control of the parent-child system. As the child grows he or she becomes more influential within the system and by adolescence becomes the target of the intervention system. Models for parent education programs can be developed for each of the following stages:

1. *Preparation for parenthood.*
The target group is future parents who are still in school and therefore readily accessible to intervention. Emphasis could be on knowledge or attitudes necessary for being an effective parent and practical experiences in the care of the young.

2. *Before children come.*
Bronfenbrenner (1974[c]) describes this as a critical point for intervention. Generally, this population group can be reached through the medical profession where potentially high-risk parents can be identified. Bronfenbrenner suggests that emphasis be given to topics such as the necessity for adequate housing, health care, nutrition and economic security before, during and after pregnancy. It is also appropriate during this period to implement a parent intervention program that provides information as well as experiences with young children.

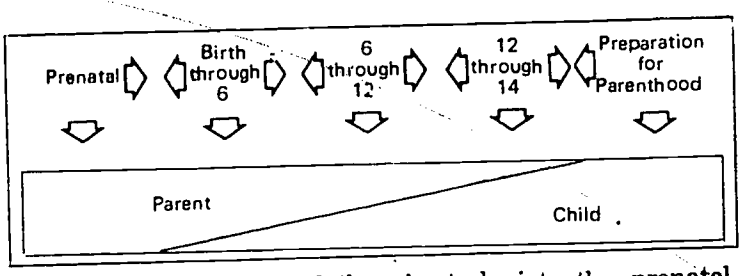
3. *The first three years of life.*
During these years the foundation is laid for an enduring and supportive emotional relationship between the

parent and child. The establishment of this bond can serve to create a stable interpersonal system capable of sustaining the child's future development. Although access to parents during this period is generally limited, strategies can include frequent home visits as well as group meetings designed to provide information and exchange ideas, concerns and practical demonstrations of specific child-rearing techniques. Key concepts to be stressed are that the parent is of primary importance and that the parenting role is one of high status.

4. *Ages 4 through 6.*
Children very often will be enrolled during this period in a group-centered preschool program, which facilitates easier access to parents. Efforts at parent education should continue with both home visits and group meetings as appropriate. The parent's status as a primary agent in supporting the development of the child should continue to be reinforced. Communication of information, exploration of attitudes and acquisition of effective child-rearing behaviors continue to be emphasized.

5. *Ages 6 through 12.*
During this stage the parent no longer serves as the child's principal teacher; therefore, home-school linkages become critical to continued intervention. The parent does continue to function as the primary person responsible for the child's total development. Intervention stresses this fact and focuses on specific aspects of this developmental stage as it relates to the role and responsibilities of the parent.

The suggested age categories associated with a particular type of parent involvement in education should be regarded as quite flexible. For example, in many parts of the country most children do not enter any kind of group care until ages 5 or 6, and the suggested approaches would need to be modified to take that fact into account. The proposed sequence will need to acknowledge the changing nature of the parent-child system and the increasing influence and autonomy of the developing child. The following diagram illustrates how the target of the parent-involvement effort changes throughout the developmental cycle.



The left-hand side of the chart depicts the prenatal period in which information and education is aimed primarily at the adult. In the early years education and involvement is still adult-oriented, but with increasing awareness of the parent-child system and its interactional effects. As the child grows older, a larger portion of the information and education may be aimed toward him or her. The parental roles gradually change and decrease in influence until the child becomes an adult and is involved in the education for parenthood programs or something similar. Thus at both ends of the generational cycle of parenting one is dealing with the adult. In between, the parent-child system is the target.

The major goals of these efforts are family-centered. Embedded in them must be a support system for the child and family that insures continuity over time. The parent's role as the primary agent in the child's life is stressed, status is afforded the role and necessary support systems are provided.

V. ISSUES: CHILD ABUSE AND PARENT EDUCATION

Is it appropriate for government to intervene in the family through education and social institutions by offering programs of parent education? The right of parents to raise their children in a manner consistent with their attitudes, values and beliefs has rarely been questioned in this country. While the majority of this nation's population will agree that all children should be protected against abusive treatment, strategies for prevention can become an emotional arena of debate. To avoid entangelement in spurious arguments, goals and objectives must clearly address techniques for *strengthening the family*. Educational content must be determined by professionals and by voluntary representatives of the parents themselves. Control must be shared by representatives of both groups if these programs are to have credibility and acceptance as viable strategies.

The generally accepted perception of the role of parents presents some very real problems related to credibility. For so many, the role of parent is perceived as having low status. Anyone capable of conceiving and delivering a child can assume this role with no special training or knowledge. The critical importance of the role and the special skills needed for effective child rearing are seen as peripheral to just "being." With the decline in our nation's birth rate, children are no longer an abundant natural resource. Unless the lay public and decision makers can be convinced that this resource of future citizens must be protected by an active advocacy posture, we will continue to reduce our potential for maintaining a high level of productive citizens. We can no longer afford to perpetuate this cycle.

Available research findings must be considered tentative. The majority of parent education programs have been targeted to low-income groups. The volunteers and samples selected for these programs generally represent

only small subgroups of our population. Efforts to generalize findings must therefore be approached with caution. The goals and objectives of most of these programs have been cognitive rather than affective. The data reporting actual changes in parent behavior or attitudes are limited. One cannot say at this point that parent education as a preventive strategy is of "proven" effectiveness. Search of the literature for studies or materials that address parent education as a strategy for prevention of child abuse yields little.

Beyond the issue of demonstrating the effectiveness of parent education in preventing child abuse and development of validated curricula is the lack of trained personnel. Training is needed at both the preparatory levels (higher education training programs) and the practitioner level. Addressing this problem will require the development of both preservice and inservice programs. Good intentions are insufficient and expertise will be needed to define content and implement effective instructional techniques.

Strategies for efficiently coordinating the delivery of services have yet to be systematically explored. Multidisciplinary approaches are clearly needed if we are to capitalize upon currently available resources. Little is to be gained from formation of yet another agency when so many groups are already working directly with families. Fragmented delivery systems are wasteful and inefficient. Coordinating these efforts will require commitment, compromise and a major realignment of resources.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND CONCERNS: NEXT STEPS

Parent education as a preventive strategy for child abuse appears to have philosophical, theoretical and research support. The assumption must *not* be made that *all* parents have identical needs and that a "cookbook" curriculum will be sufficient. Many individual differences exist in the area of needs, strengths and weaknesses related to effective child-rearing and parental competencies. Program strategies must address ways of individualizing content and delivery modes so that a match is achieved between the developmental level of the parent or future parent and the program goals. These strategies should be sensitive to and reflect:

- A primary concern for strengthening the family unit that recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of relationships, needs and unique goals.
- Public recognition and acknowledgment of the complexity and importance of the parenting role to our present society and future survival.
- Development of strategies that would involve parents in the process of specifying goals and objectives relevant to them, their children, and their hopes and aspirations.
- The need to develop materials that are directed to social and emotional goals for children and parents as well as the somewhat narrower school-related goals and concerns.
- The need to develop training programs for personnel that take into account appropriate strategies for working with families—adults as well as children.
- Concern for strategies that would facilitate the coordination and full utilization of all existing delivery systems.

Some Possible Areas for Action

1. Advocacy efforts at national, state and local levels to support the concept of strengthening the family.

2. Advocacy efforts to upgrade the status of the parenting role, acknowledging the complexity, difficulty and *primacy* of the tasks involved.

3. Specification of goals and objectives, with input from parents as well as professionals, for parent education as a strategy for preventing child abuse.

4. Systematic development of appropriate materials for specific parent groups and age levels.

5. Development of both preservice and inservice programs for training personnel to function in a variety of delivery systems and circumstances.

6. Design of alternative delivery models that address:
   a) Varying support levels for specific parent groups whose needs differ.
   b) Identification and utilization of existing resources, particularly those that may be uniquely effective with parents who do not respond to traditional approaches.
   c) Coordination of multidisciplinary approaches to build upon the strengths and insights of each discipline—medicine, education, psychology, political science, sociology, and so forth.

7. Support of demonstration parent education programs focusing upon prevention of child abuse.

8. Evaluation of alternative programs and delivery systems to secure information to guide future efforts.

In conclusion, parent education as a possible preventive for child abuse bears serious consideration. Research, social needs and common sense all support this approach. There is much about parent education, particularly as a preventive strategy, that is still unknown, but a start must be made. Implementing these strategies will be difficult and require long-range commitment, but the effort has promise of equally long-range social benefits.

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