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Today's families face monumental stresses associated with daily living. A stagnant economy routinely demands family employment in two or three jobs, leaving little time for effective parenting. Job insecurity often fuels family discontinuity and fragmentation. Unemployment, once the condition of the unskilled, has affected pink and white collar

workers, causing more and more parents regularly to face complexities that make nurturing children difficult. Finally, the rise in the number of single parents, many of them teenage or never married, places heavy burdens on families and on society.

As these dramatic demographic changes have occurred, so have equally profound advances in our knowledge about the relationship between demographic conditions, family life, and child outcomes. We know, for example, that economically deprived single mothers are more likely to abuse their children physically (Gelles, 1989), that premature low-birthweight babies born into poverty have a poorer prognosis of functioning within normal ranges (Bradley et al., 1994), and that family income and poverty are powerful correlates of the cognitive development and behavior of young children (Duncan et al., 1994). Conversely, we know that when economic conditions of families are improved, or when services such as parent education and support are offered, outcomes for children, siblings, and families improve (Roberts & Wasik, 1990; Seitz & Apfel, 1994).

Such advances in scientific knowledge--while perhaps not fully understood by parents--have filtered into public consciousness. American parents recognize that parenting is important and that they can benefit from help in meeting their parenting duties. A recent survey by the Public Agenda (1994), for example, noted that one-third of parents feel that teachers today are doing a worse job than teachers of the previous generation. But 55% also said that they themselves are doing a worse job of parenting than their parents did. When asked if a child was more likely to succeed if he or she came from a stable and supportive family but attended a poor school, or if he or she came from a troubled family but attended a good school, 61% of the parents said the child with the more stable family had the better chance of success.

In short, Americans understand the importance of parental competence; that is why they flock to bookstores to buy parenting magazines and why they cruise electronic bulletin boards that offer advice and conversation.

PARENTING EDUCATION: TIMELY AND USEFUL

Not insensitive to parents' needs, social service providers are recontouring their efforts to provide parent education and family support programs. Parent education programs are growing in number and becoming increasingly diverse on virtually every dimension imaginable: sponsorship, funding mechanisms, audience, intensity, staffing patterns, and evaluation strategy.
What binds these diverse programs together? Contrary to the approach used in the days when parent education had a didactic, if not somewhat elitist, orientation, today's approach is more universally adapted. While programs differ in how they carry out activities, they tend to embrace a common set of principles: (1) a focus on prevention

and optimization rather than treatment; (2) a recognition of the need to work with the entire family and community; (3) a commitment to regarding the family as an active participant in the planning and execution of the program rather than as a "passive client" waiting to receive services; (4) a commitment to nourishing cultural diversity; (5) a focus on strength-based needs analyses, programming, and evaluation; and (6) flexible staffing (Dunst & Trivette, 1994). In practice, adherence to these principles suggests that today's parent education and support programs endow families with primary responsibility for their children's development and well-being; envision healthy, functioning families as the basis of a healthy society; and understand families as a part of a system that includes neighborhood and community.

CURRENT ISSUES IN PARENTING EDUCATION

Changes in nomenclature represent one of several current issues in parent education. Terminology used--besides parent education--includes parent empowerment, family education, family life education, parent support, and family support. Some other issues include:

The equity issue. Parent education is alive and well in the marketplace, with affluent consumers exercising choice and purchasing information. Low-income parents have far more limited access to formal parenting programs and less discretionary income with which to purchase information. If parent education is left to market forces alone, the wealthy will become more information rich, while the poor will become comparatively and actually more information poor.

The voluntary/involuntary issue. Presently, most programs are voluntary, with parents determining the nature and length of their engagement. Increasingly, as programs receive public funding and are designed to ameliorate a particular problem (substance abuse or child abuse, for example), their voluntary nature comes into question. Changing from a voluntary to a required program may alter the intent and nature of family support and violate its basic principles.

The cultural competence issue. Beneath the face of parent education and support lie widely different ideas about what constitutes effective parenting, varying often with cultural predispositions and orientations (Caldwell et al., 1994). Discerning multiple understandings of what constitutes competence across and among cultures and delineating effective ways to build parental competence while nourishing diversity remain a challenge.

The quality issue. Because parent education and family support efforts have grown fairly rapidly, and because they have emerged from different professional traditions, attempts to address program quality are only beginning to emerge. Uncertainty regarding specific variables associated with quality outcomes prevails. Overall, there is little specification regarding the competencies, training, or credentials needed for working in the programs. Tools to evaluate program quality and methods of program

accreditation are only now being developed.

The results issue. While it is appropriate to demand results from parenting education and family support efforts, the programs must be recognized for what they are and are not. They do not replace efforts in community development or major employment initiatives. They do enhance parents' overall competence and self-efficacy, knowledge of child development, and capacities to parent more effectively. It is for these outcomes that parent education should be held accountable. To date, only sporadic evaluation of parent education and family support has taken place. Much of the data collected have been on pilot programs and have been conducted by the program developers without random assignment of participants (Powell, 1994). More emphasis needs to be placed on durable, scientific, objective evaluations that measure those results that the interventions are designed to accomplish.

The linkage/coordination issue. The need to engage in cooperative planning, coordination of service delivery, and infrastructure development across programs, communities, and states is becoming acute. In some locales, voluntary networks of parent education and family support programs are developing, fostering linkages that promote coordination and access.

POTENTIAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

If parent education and family support are an important national priority, policymakers can support such programs by fostering public-private collaborations and supporting publicly funded efforts for low-income parents. The conditions of families are affected also by every piece of social legislation, and family support can be infused into a broad range of social supports. As the nation considers many new contracts, let us remember that the most significant contract of all is the familial contract we undertake with our children.

Adapted from: Kagan, Sharon L. (1995). On Building Parental Competence: The Nature of Contracts and Commitments. In THE CHALLENGE OF PARENTING IN THE '90S. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.

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