

parent education— from where and whom?

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Status of Parent Education

Though society expects parents to fulfill the important role of child rearing, most parents aren't prepared for it. It's alarming to realize that most parents learn to do it "on-the-job," and resort to their own experiences for child-rearing information.

By depending on personal experiences, they're assuming the attitude that "experience is the best teacher." Actually in this case, "experience *can* be one's worst enemy." Unfortunately, child-rearing experiences that form attitudes and provide knowledge often become habits that are difficult to change. The actual danger isn't the habits, but misinformation and misconceptions of child development and ways to socialize children.

It's generally assumed that parents also depend on peers, elders, relatives, and printed material for child-rearing knowledge. These informal learning methods are subjective for parents who don't have the guidelines to evaluate the credibility and value of this information.

As more information is available for improving child rearing, parents are becoming increasingly aware of the uniqueness of childhood. Considering a child's rapid growth and the large amount of time spent at home during the first few years of life, the scope of parental influence, responsibility, and contribution has tremendous impact. Experiences from these early years build the foundation for later development—physical, social, emotional, and intellectual. To make these early years more meaningful, parents need to:

1. Gain some basic knowledge on child development.
2. Acquire some understanding of how various forms of

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parent-child interaction may promote or deter the goals of development.

3. Be aware of the ways parents can contribute to children's later achievement.

To make parent education more accessible to the public, two questions need to be answered:

1. Where do parents and expectant parents acquire child-rearing information?
2. How knowledgeable or well-informed are parents and expectant parents concerning child development?

By answering these questions, parent educators can better evaluate the effectiveness of present programs and develop better means of reaching the general public.

Extension, which is actively involved in bringing non-traditional educational programs to the public, has the "know-how" for making parent education accountable and available to the people.

The Study

Recently at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, these questions were studied. A questionnaire was answered by 82 men and 101 expectant women in southwe Virginia. In the questionnaire, the respondents stated what sources they used to obtain child-rearing information. They also answered 20 multiple-choice questions on infant development.

It was found that these respondents received child-rearing information from three major sources: child care/rearing books (27%); caring for children (27%); and parents, in-laws, and peers (22%). Twice as many women as men said books were their main source of information. Twice as many men indicated that their main source was parents, in-laws, and peers. In addition, four times as many women as men have learned about child rearing by caring for children. The rest of the respondents turned to the following sources: medical personnel, high school and college classes, magazines and newspaper articles, and other sources.

The study showed that in respect to age, education level, and number of children, women were more knowledgeable than men in all areas of infant development. Child-rearing knowledge for both men and women increased with higher education and the number of children in the family. For women, the amount of knowledge also increased with age. Interestingly men who were most knowledgeable were between 18-29 years old.

Findings

Personal Experience

Based on the findings of this study, many conclusions can be made. Parents depend greatly on their own experiences for child-rearing knowledge. They depend especially on their observations and experiences with their own family and from experiences they've had taking care of children. The latter source is especially significant because this study showed the knowledge of child development increased with the number of children. Therefore, the belief that many people learn to be parents "on-the-job" is true. Does this mean earlier born children are short-changed?

Books

A large percentage of the respondents depend on child care and child-rearing books for information. This shows books are important sources for parents . . . a fact supported by the large number of "how-to" books on the market. The quality and content of these books vary considerably. The public needs guidelines and criteria to choose the best "how-to" books.

Men's Knowledge

The men who are most knowledgeable about child development are between 18-29 years old. This is indicative of the fact that more active young fathers are taking an interest in the rearing of children, and are thus more aware of their development.

Medical Personnel

Although most parents call on physicians and other medical personnel for their children's physical and medical care, most of them don't perceive these professionals as resources for child-rearing information. These professionals are resources that can be better used to disseminate child-rearing information or in referring parents to other sources.

Formal Classes

High school and college classes in child development and parent education reached only six percent of the sample. Unfortunately, though our educational system has the responsibility of educating children for parenthood, parent education is at best a limited part of the curriculum in some school systems—and many others are still debating its appropriateness in the school curricula.

As children need and have the right to be reared by those who are knowledgeable, the American public needs parent education in addition to "on-the-job" experiences. Parents and parents-to-be need to develop their "parenting potential" to the fullest. If the availability of the best education is a societal goal, why not make parent education a part of it?

**Newspapers
and Magazines**

Newspapers and magazines aren't well used by parents. While books often cover child-rearing problems from a developmental viewpoint beginning from infancy, newspaper and magazine articles don't offer all this at one time. The articles are usually piecemeal. Parents can't depend on them as handy references as they can on a book. In addition, probably only a small population subscribe to magazines that carry articles related to child care and development.

Summary

In summary, it's suggested that parent educators need to:

1. Develop guidelines for parents to use in evaluating parenting and child-rearing materials.
2. Educate the public that parent education is a necessary part of the school curricula and should be included in all school systems.
3. Better use professionals, for example, Extension agents, physicians, nurses, social workers, clergy, and teachers in addition to parent educators, in disseminating child-rearing information or referring parents to available sources.
4. Investigate ways to improve the use of mass media in parenthood education.

**Implications
for
Extension**

Extension staff cooperating with other parent educators could contribute greatly in achieving these goals. Extension publication efforts could be focused on the development and updating of parent education materials.

Extension personnel could present parent education programs and distribute parent education materials to special audiences. For example, specific audiences would include teenage parents, low-income families, school dropouts, and others of similar backgrounds. These groups might be identified through the public health department, mental health association, and social service contacts.

General efforts to promote support for parent education in the school and the community could be made by enlisting the cooperation and aid of civic, religious, professional, parent-teacher groups, and Extension-related organizations. Extension can provide leadership in initiating and developing childbirth and parent education organizations. These groups could eventually become self-perpetuating and, hopefully, the role of Extension would evolve into that of consultant.

Extension personnel, with their knowledge of and access to community resources, might serve as a "clearinghouse"

or in a referral role in matching the right ideas with the right people. Extension could provide significant parent education input by using telephone "hot lines" and public service spots on radio and television.

Furthermore, Extension can work hand-in-hand with school personnel in developing and presenting curricula for use at the local community level. This activity could involve both the traditional, formal school systems as well as nontraditional educational efforts, such as "free universities" or parent interest groups.

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