

are extension agents parent educators?

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The phone rings in an Extension office—a mother requests a recipe for play dough. Another call is for information about house plants that are safe to have around a two-year-old who's "eating everything." A third request is from a parent who's looking for new ideas for inexpensive, nutritious snacks for his youngsters and their friends.

The calls receive prompt, courteous attention—and the fact that these questions and their answers represent an important nationwide resource in parent education goes unnoticed. Many Extension agents might be surprised to hear their answers described as "parent education." Yet, if we look carefully, we find that the Extension system provides a reliable, available, and free source of the kind of information many parents of young children need most.

. . . A parent group needs the very things Extension agents can provide: skilled, sensitive group leadership and an organization that cares enough about parents to bring them together for discussion and mutual support.

In many other ways, Extension efforts go unrecognized as parent education. 4-H leaders receive training and ongoing professional help in understanding and working effectively with 9 to 19 year olds—experience that can be of great value to the leaders as parents. Junior leaders and members enrolled in child care and baby-sitting programs examine important principles of human development, and learn about caring for children. The attitudes and skills acquired by young people through these activities may prove to be invaluable when they become parents.

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Perhaps most important of all, Extension offers parents the opportunity to gain parenting skills in an informal, friendly atmosphere—skills that have a positive effect on self-concept and the feelings of personal worth.

**Need for
Parent
Education**

Less often, we find Extension efforts focusing specifically on programs described as parent education. It may be that in many instances we are overlooking an important community need—a need that becomes more intense as our society becomes more mobile and fragmented.

The isolation from traditional kinship supports is compounded by economic pressures, the desires of mothers to return to work, and the ever-increasing number of single-parent families. Child abuse statistics indicate that many American families, in *all* socioeconomic groups and in *both* urban and rural settings, are experiencing the kinds of stress for which children pay a terrible, often tragic, price.

While some parents are deeply troubled and in need of professional help, others need to meet and talk with other parents about child-rearing concerns. We've observed over and over again expressions of relief and delight on the faces of parents as they hear, *from other parents*, that they don't have the *only* two-year-old who bites; that there are many four-year-olds who swear; and that other parents also agonize over such issues as bed-wetting, temper tantrums, and unreasonable child fears.

There may be little need for a presentation or formal program. What's needed is friendly, skilled group leaders who can help parents share concerns and child-rearing opinions, as well as serve as a resource person.

Definitions

To Parent

Let's look at some definitions. First of all, a definition of *to parent* by Dodson: "To use, with tender loving care, all the knowledge science has accumulated about child psychology in order to raise happy and intelligent human beings."¹ Many of us assume that "tender loving care" is a gift automatically passed from one generation to the next. But not all parents are able to respond to their children with tenderness, and the skills of caring for a child are learned, not instinctive. Children who experience violence or inadequate care early in life must, and often do, *learn* other parenting styles so as not to inflict poor caring on the next generation.

*Parental
Competence*

Parental competence appears to consist of two interwoven components. The first is the ability to give love and nurturing which is gained through the experience of being

loved and nurtured, as a child or in a relationship with another adult. The second component is parental understanding of age-appropriate behavior and development.

Reparenting Case workers and psychologists frequently voice dismay over the time they must spend *reparenting* the parent before they can begin to help the family from the child's perspective. Yet Extension Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) aides have often established close relationships with parents and managed to pass along valid information about nutrition at the same time. Perhaps we could adapt the model for parent education.

Parent Education Consider the Education Commission of the States' definition of *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."²

Isn't this exactly what Extension programs in adult homemaking try to do? Can we help parents see that just as their view of themselves affects their ability to function, so, too, are children affected by their self-concepts and feelings of personal adequacy? Few parents are in the habit of offering the reinforcement and recognition children need so desperately and constantly.

Group Facilitator Perhaps a parent educator is best described as a *group facilitator*. There appears to be a moment of revelation for every parent educator, a point at which it becomes clear that when any group of parents comes together, there's an enormous reservoir of wisdom, experience, and common sense from which intelligent and loving answers to child-rearing problems can be drawn. The group leader facilitates the process of matching the wisdom of the group with the questions and concerns of individuals within the group.

Parent Educator Qualifications The ability of the parent educator is probably the single most important variable in determining an effective parent education program. The qualifications many agents bring to their jobs closely resemble those most desirable in parent educators:

- Empathy with and liking for people.
- Tolerance for a variety of family values and lifestyles.
- Sensitivity to group dynamics.
- Ability to elicit and maintain constructive group discussion.

- Listening skills.
- Sufficient assertiveness to establish comfortable group structure that allows participants equal time to speak and be heard.
- Sense of humor.
- Confidence in his/her role as a facilitator of discussion rather than as an expert who can provide answers to parental questions.

A basic understanding of human growth and development is essential for an effective parent educator. Knowledge about normal development can enable a leader to refer a parent for special help. The leader can share information about age-appropriate behaviors in a way that is both reassuring and enlightening to parent participants.

Sample Meeting

The following example illustrates the kind of effective leadership we're trying to define.

At the second Extension meeting of a group of parents of preschoolers, the difficulties of food likes and dislikes emerged as a topic of general interest. One member of the group, Mrs. Y, told the group that she frequently cooked four different meals for dinner each night, one for herself and husband and a different meal for each of her three children. A second group member, Mrs. X, responded quickly, "You should never do that. You should cook one meal, put it on the table and say, 'that's it.'"

Other members of the group agreed. The group leader asked the group to identify the issues involved in this situation. Giving in to children, spoiling, allowing children to tell mother what to do were mentioned quickly. The group leader then said, "When Mrs. Y described the situation to us, it didn't sound to me as if she regarded it as a problem to be concerned about. Mrs. Y, can you tell us a little more about your feelings?" Mrs. Y laughed a little and said, "I kind of like it. I like to cook and it's a way for me to make each child feel special. Even though we often eat different foods, we eat them together and we all enjoy the evening meal. I never thought of it as a problem." Mrs. X asked, "Don't you feel resentful and mad when you have to do that work?"

After considerable discussion, the group leader said, "Mrs. X would find the arrangement intolerable, but for Mrs. Y it seems to work out well. She feels her family eats a well-balanced diet and she gets an opportunity to give each child a little special individual attention. This is an example of our idea that we look for ways for parents and

children to live comfortably together." The group leader didn't try to be an expert and tell parents what they should do in raising their children. Instead, the leader tried to give each member of the group access to the accumulated wisdom of which the leader's knowledge is only one part.

Summary

Our awareness of the lack of community support for large numbers of parents has been highlighted by our recognition of the primary importance of parents in the lives and learnings of their children. Extension has a history of commitment to fostering family strength, but never has the need of parents for information, support, and help with child-rearing been so great.

Parent newsletters, films, lectures, presentations, and printed material are useful supplementary materials. But the heart of parent education is in personal relationships and group process. Extension agents can:

1. Form parent advisory committees to identify issues, audiences, and resources within local communities.
2. Emphasize the value of ongoing discussions and enduring groups over one-shot presentations and/or programs.
3. Match needs and audiences with resources.

An effective leader for a parent group is usually the key to its success. Many agents have the skills to be effective parent educators. When they don't feel competent or have time, they're almost always in a position in their communities to identify and train others who can become group facilitators. A parent group doesn't need a specific preplanned curriculum or program, although sometimes a group will decide that there are ideas it wishes to examine. A parent group needs the very things Extension agents can provide: skilled, sensitive group leadership and an organization that cares enough about parents to bring them together for discussion and mutual support.

Footnotes

1. Fitzhugh Dodson, *How to Parent* (New York: Signet, New America Library, Incorporated, 1970), p. 21.
2. *Education for Parenthood: A Primary Prevention Strategy for Child Abuse and Neglect*, Report No. 93 (Denver, Colorado: Education Commission of the States, December, 1976), p. 2.