

a newsletter for new parents

Lynda C. Harriman

The birth of a child is likely one of the most teachable moments in a parent's life. It's a time when parents need to learn and to learn quickly all they can about infancy and parenting. Ironically, there may be less time to seek information because of increasing demands on one's time and energy. Education directed at parents should be: (1) relevant to current parental concerns and (2) readily accessible so that learning can be integrated into parents' time schedules.

A study of 82 men and 101 expectant women concurred with the notion that parents prefer readily accessible sources to obtain child-rearing information.¹ The sources preferred by these parents were child care/rearing books; personal experience in caring for children; and parents, in-laws, and peers. Results of a survey of fathers of infants indicated that fathers preferred to receive child care/rearing information from books, pamphlets, newsletters, and television.² These parents, too, preferred resources that could be used in their own homes.

The birth of a child is likely one of the most teachable moments in a parent's life. It's a time when parents need to learn and to learn quickly all they can about infancy and parenting. . . .

Newsletter Approach

In an effort to reach new parents during the teachable moment immediately following the birth of a child, a series of six newsletters titled "Living and Learning with Infants" was developed. The series was a part of the ongoing young families thrust within the Illinois Cooperative Extension family living program.

Lynda C. Harriman: Assistant Professor, Human Development, Department of Home Economics, Illinois State University—Normal. Accepted for publication: August, 1979.

The purposes of this newsletter series were to:

1. Provide parents of newborns with some basic child care/rearing information.
2. Provide information in a form easily accessible to parents.
3. Acquaint more parents with Extension as an educational resource.
4. Put county Extension personnel in contact with more young families.

Content Information on 14 topics was included in the series. Each newsletter contained information on two or three topics. Topics of interest to parents during the first three months of a baby's life were selected. They included: your needs and *baby's*, *colic*, *appearance and development*, *parent-child* relationships, baby's need for attention, play, baby's growing abilities, the role of grandparents, and others.

Distribution Thirty-five Illinois county Extension home economists included the newsletter series as part of their young family program. Distribution of the series varied by county. In some counties, the local hospital maternity ward included the first letter with a special packet sent home with mothers. In other counties, names were obtained from newspaper birth announcements. A return card was included with the first letter asking parents if they wanted to receive additional newsletters. The returned cards were then used as the mailing list for the remainder of the series. In most counties, letters were mailed bi-weekly for the first three months after the baby's birth.

Evaluation Sixteen counties participated in an evaluation of the newsletter program. Participating counties varied in their population make-up from being mostly rural to largely metropolitan. Evaluation responses were obtained from 501 parents. Parents were asked to evaluate the usefulness of each newsletter topic included in the series by judging it very useful, of some use, or of little use. Four topics were identified by the respondents as containing the most useful information. These topics were: baby's need for attention, baby's health, baby's growing abilities, and parent-child relationships. The topics judged by the respondents as the least useful information were: the role of grandparents and choosing a caregiver. Table 1 shows the summary data on the usefulness of all the topics.

Table 1. Usefulness of information.

Topics	N=501 Very useful
Baby's need for attention	78%
Baby's health	74
Baby's growing abilities	73
Parent-child relationships	72
Your needs and baby's	69
Thumb-sucking and pacifiers	67
Colic	65
Introducing foods	65
Play	64
Safe toys	63
Caring for baby's skin	63
Appearances and development	63
Choosing a caregiver	51
The role of grandparents	45

In addition to the questionnaire data, parents were asked to give their comments and reactions to the series. Here are some of those comments:

"I'm so glad you sent the newsletters and this page. I have enjoyed the newsletters and they are reassuring. I'm glad they stress the ideas of being relaxed as parents and enjoying your child. This is a worthwhile service for mothers and fathers. Thank you."

"I really enjoyed reading these articles and learning things that are sensible, but you just don't always think about. I'm keeping every article in a folder to refer back to later."

"Since this was my first baby, I was so scared because I didn't know anything. Your newsletters helped me so much."

"I have another child and I found out that every baby is different. You helped me learn some new things that I didn't know before."

"I liked how the articles were short, brief, and to the point."

"I feel your articles were very good as I looked at them from a layperson's point of view. I am an RN and am familiar with the major part of your information; it certainly is a series worth continuing."

The birth of a child certainly seems to result in a "teachable moment" for parents. Suddenly, it's glaringly apparent that parenting isn't a simple task. Many questions and feelings of uncertainty arise.

Respondents who participated in the newsletter evaluations were asked to identify additional specific topics of concern they'd like to have addressed in a similar format. Most concerns fell into one of three categories; child rearing, caretaking, or health and nutrition. Major subjects of interest identified in each category were:

1. Child rearing—toilet training, sibling rivalry, discipline, child behavior, and weaning.
2. Caretaking—stages of development, working mothers, father's role.
3. Health and nutrition—childhood diseases, breastfeeding, teething, and care of teeth and immunizations.

What Does It All Mean?

Parent educators shouldn't assume that the one program that successfully reaches and teaches new parents means the task is completed. Often, as learning increases, so do questions.

Seeking parental input to identify additional parenting concerns and interests is one important way to continually determine educational priorities. It also sets on-target directions for future informational programs directed to meet the needs of parents. The evaluation input received from participants in one parent education program provides the basis for planning future programs.

Learning experiences should be coordinated to supplement and reinforce one another. People learn in many ways and preferred methods of learning may change with life situations. New parents reached by a special program should be alerted to other young family activities in the total county Extension program. In this way, they can continue to select learning experiences that meet their changing needs and interests.

Footnotes

1. Victoria R. Fu, Michael J. Sporkowski, and Rose N. Martin, "Parent Education—From Where and Whom?" *Journal of Extension*, XVI (May/June, 1978), 21-25.
2. Lynda C. Harriman, "Selected Factors Relating to Fathers' Perception of Their Parenting Role" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1979).