

parent-child interaction: a successful program model

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*"I didn't fully realize the learning importance of preschool play, nor did I realize how little time I had ever spent playing with Christie until I became involved in PCI. Although you are with your children almost constantly, you are concerned with doing other things at the same time. And taking time to play with them each day makes that time their very own—something special to them."
Parent enrolled in PCI*

Though a major focus of Extension program efforts in the area of family has been parent education, most parents drop out long before the series of educational meetings is completed.¹ Some programs have been aborted even before the first group meeting due to the failure of families to enroll. In spite of this, parents often feel inadequate as their children's teachers. This is especially true of young and first-time parents, a part of the population often unaware of Extension.

Parent-Child Interaction (PCI) provides Extension with a scientifically and practically proven innovative approach to enriching parent-child relationships. PCI is a program that

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works! In fact, it's currently serving young families in at least 28 states.

What's Wrong with the Old?

The majority of parenting programs offered by Extension and other educational institutions have been in the traditional lecture/discussion group format. A comprehensive evaluation of various parent education models has indicated the lecture/discussion model doesn't produce lasting gains.² One of the major problems with those parent education efforts is the high drop-out rate. Well over 50% drop out—even when paid to attend!³

Families with young children often miss meetings because children get sick, weather conditions interfere, and other obligations conflict. Typically, the parent no longer feels a part of the group after missing a meeting or two, the original commitment lessens, and attendance becomes increasingly sporadic and finally ends.

What's Right with PCI?

Evaluation of parent education models found the successful ones centered on the parent interacting with the child in a specific activity like playing a game.⁴ The Parent-Child Interaction program is based on this model and was developed by Missouri Extension Service. The target audience is families with three- and four-year-old children.

PCI is designed to instruct parents to teach their children selected basic cognitive and perceptual skills using toys as the instructional media. The long-range goal of PCI is to increase parents' ability to relate to their children in ways that help the children's cognitive or intellectual growth. To state it more simply, PCI teaches parents to be teachers of their own children.

Parents of young children aren't only their first teachers—they are their best teachers!

One of the toys is called "sound cans." The sound cans are made of two sets of six film cannisters—one set for the child and one for the parent. Each pair of cans is filled with different contents such as popcorn, paper clips, dried beans, or rice.

The object of the game is to listen carefully to the set of sound cans and see if the two cans containing the same objects can be identified. Some of the differences are obvious to the ear—others are more subtle. Listening is a very important skill—and a curious, active child often needs help in this area.

The sound cans do just this—they have the child stop, look, and listen. Sound like fun?

"I hope the rest of the mothers have gotten as big a bang out of this as I have." PCI mother

How Does PCI Work?

Parents meet one hour a week for nine weeks. Children don't attend these sessions. The meetings are conducted by either Extension home economists or by trained volunteers. Teaching tools include: standardized videotapes, guidesheets, group discussion and role play, and educational toys. The nine videotapes demonstrate ordinary parents and children playing with the toys in ways that foster the learning of cognitive and perceptual skills. The guidesheets correspond to the videotapes and provide additional instruction on using the toys.

How Do We Know It Works?

The first test of PCI was an experimental study involving 120 families recruited in 5 Extension program areas in Missouri. Families were randomly assigned to participate (experimental group) or not (control group). Recruitment was accomplished through mass media and personal contact. A fairly typical cross-section of Missouri families was included.

The parent educators in this phase of PCI were Extension area specialists in child and family development. These specialists were responsible for making the toys used in their area. Over 600 volunteers (4-H members, Homemaker Extension Club women, nursing home residents, senior citizens clubs, local jail inmates, Head Start parents, high school vocational students, and others) were used in this effort.

Children were tested before and after the program with the *Cognitive and Perceptual Skills Test (CAPS)*, a 63-item instrument designed specifically for PCI evaluation. Evaluation is a crucial component and a major strength of this model. The data were analyzed for differences in cognitive and perceptual skill gains between the experimental and control groups. Children whose parents participated in PCI training gained significantly more in these skills than children whose parents didn't participate.

The PCI program had a significant impact on both the parents' ability to teach and children's ability to develop cognitive and perceptual skills. Further, the videotaped instruction combined with written guidesheet instruction and role play was effective in training parents to teach skills to their children. The videotaped instruction was cited as the "most helpful aspect of the program" and facilitated the 100%

completion rate of the mothers involved in the pilot study. Those unable to attend a regular PCI meeting could make it up by coming to the Extension Center to individually view the tape and check out the toy. Thus, no one ever got so far behind he/she felt continuing the program was futile.

"The project made me spend more time alone with my child. I was surprised that we both enjoyed it so much." PCI parent

Interest in expanding the program quickly developed both within and beyond the state boundaries of Missouri. Funding from Extension Service was obtained and over 1,000 families have enrolled in Missouri alone. The program is currently operating in 28 states. Average gain scores on the CAPS continue to be significant (11 or more points). About 85% to 90% of the parents who begin the program complete all 9 weeks plus a post-test session. This completion rate is phenomenal! Parents have rated PCI "very helpful," with means ranging from 5.96 to 6.09 on a 7-point evaluation scale.

It's encouraging to find children's gains remain high as the investigators control of the program decreases. This indicates that the model has potential applicability for the diverse group of Extension personnel responsible for parent education efforts.

Summary

PCI is a highly successful parent education program that has been carefully evaluated throughout each stage of development and expansion. It's scientifically proven, it "works," and it attracts a highly desirable audience (young families) to Extension programs.

Footnotes

1. ECOP Subcommittee on Home Economics, *Focus II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974) and Sharon Schneeberger, "Educational Models for Parents of Young Children: Rationale and Effectiveness" (Unpublished report, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee, 1976).
2. Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Is Early Intervention Effective?" in *Handbook of Evaluation Research*, E. L. Struening and M. Guttentag, eds. (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1975).
3. Schneeberger, "Educational Models."
4. Bronfenbrenner, "Is Early Intervention Effective?"