

Positive Parenting for High-

Teen, single, divorced, foster, abusive, substance affected, and incarcerated parents and their children participated in intensive parenting education classes lasting 9 to 24 weeks. Participants were primarily single (58%), Hispanic (60%), and female (60%). Parents showed significant increases in empathy and knowledge of positive discipline techniques, and significant decreases in parent-child role reversals, inappropriate expectations, belief in corporal punishment, and oppression of children's independence following the learning experiences.

In 1999, New Mexico was identified as one of the worst places in the nation to raise a child due to high rates of poverty, single parent families, school dropout, and teen pregnancy (Kids Count Data Book, 1999). At the same time, welfare reform legislation encouraged states to spend block grant funds on programs to involve fathers and strengthen families. In response, the New Mexico Human Services department issued a request for proposals for a statewide program to provide fatherhood and family strengthening services to high-risk families. High-risk families were defined as teen, unmarried, single, divorced, abusive, substance affected, and incarcerated parents with limited financial resources.

Faculty members in Family and Consumer Sciences and Extension Home Economics developed the *Strengthening Families Initiative* to offer intensive parenting, life skills, and nutrition

education to high-risk parents and their children. The proposal was funded at \$2.4 million dollars for 3 years. This article describes the evaluation of the parenting education component in the first 2 years of the program.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Parenthood is one of the most stressful and demanding of life roles, yet it is the role for which most adults receive the least preparation and support (Skolnick, 1991). Contemporary parents face many challenges including increasing poverty, family isolation, fewer supports for families, and a declining sense of community (Sviridoff & Ryan, 1996). The consequences of not educating parents are tremendous. Poor parenting skills are linked to societal problems such as teen pregnancy, adolescent substance abuse, and youth violence (Barnes & Farrell, 1992;

Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Patterson, 1996).

Many researchers have documented the impact of parenting education (Barber, 1992; Dembo, Sweitzer, & Lauritzen, 1985; Todres & Bunston, 1993; Wolfe, 1999). Parents who participate in parenting classes report greater knowledge of child development and parenting skills (Brems, Baldwin, & Baxter, 1993; Weisman, Schreiber, & Robinson, 1992), increased confidence (Barber, 1992; Johnson, Walker, & Rodriguez, 1997), and decreased rates of abuse (Britner & Repucci, 1997; Whipple & Wilson, 1996). Positive outcomes for children include fewer behavioral problems (Thompson, Grow, Ruma, Daly, & Burke, 1993), greater academic achievement (Dembo et al., 1985), and increases in social and intellectual development (Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Yarnell, 1991).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Despite the evidence of effectiveness of parenting education, there are many limitations to the current body of knowledge. Research has been conducted primarily with middle-class, European American

Risk Families

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mothers. Less is known about parenting education with culturally and economically diverse families. In addition, much of the previous research has targeted well-functioning families. High-risk families are less likely to participate in parenting programs (Powell, Zambrana, & Silva-Palacios, 1990; Schorr, 1988) and research studies. Many programs do not use evidence-based curricula or conduct evaluations using valid, reliable measures. Finally, many programs work only with parents and do not have a family-centered approach. Including children suggests the entire family learns together, and has an opportunity to build family cohesion. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a family-centered parenting program for culturally diverse, high-risk families using science-based curricula and evaluation tools.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Curriculum Selection

The families targeted for this initiative face similar challenges. Most have less than a high school education, are living in poverty, lack social support, and experience high levels of stress. Many are from minority cultural groups. The population of New Mexico is 42% Hispanic and 10% Native American (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

The characteristics and needs of high-risk groups must be considered when choosing a parenting curriculum (Abell, Mize, & Shields, 1999; Remeika & Thornburg, 1999). Teen parents need to have their developmental issues addressed. Expectant parents seek information on role changes and the needs of infants. Single parents want suggestions for managing loneliness and role overload, and maintaining the adult-child hierarchy. Divorced parents desire help with co-parenting issues and resolving conflict. Abusive and neglectful parents have a need for information on child development and healthy coping strategies. Substance-affected families seek help setting boundaries and establishing schedules and routines. Incarcerated parents can use ideas for parenting at a distance and understanding how children change during a parent's confinement.

The *Nurturing Parenting (NP) Program* (Bavolek, 1984; Bavolek & Bavolek, 2002) was selected as the curricula that best met the varying needs of high-risk families in New Mexico. The NP Program has been extensively field-tested and validated with high-risk families, and was designated a Model Program by the federal government. It offers curricula designed for expectant parents, teen parents, parents with preschool, school-age, and adolescent children, foster parents, and substance-affected families. The Program also includes curricula for Spanish-speaking parents.

Program Content, Format, and Resources

Content. The NP Program addresses self-nurturing and parenting skills. Self-nurturing topics include communication and conflict resolution, stress, personal power, and avoiding substance abuse. Parenting topics include family rules, rewards and punishment, choices and consequences, age-appropriate expectations, communicating with children, and establishing routines. Parents and children 6 years and older also receive instruction in life skills and nutrition; however, the data related to life skills and nutrition is not reported here.

Format. For every NP curriculum, the format is the same. Classes meet once a week and each class lasts 2½ hours. However, the number of classes per series ranges from 9 to 24 (see Table 1). To be effective, interventions for high-risk families must be of longer duration than interventions for well-functioning families.

Interactive teaching strategies were used to pres-

ent information on parenting, life skills, and nutrition. Parents were given time in class to practice skills and homework assignments were given to reinforce the new skills. Classes for children ran concurrently with classes for parents. Children participated in art, music, drama, and games designed to teach program concepts at a developmentally appropriate level. During the family nurturing time, parents and children came together for songs, games, and activities to promote family bonding.

Resources. The program package for each NP curriculum ranges from \$850 to \$1620. Each package includes implementation and activity manuals, 15 parent handbooks, 15 children's books, resource materials, parenting videos, evaluation measures, and certificates. Some packages also include family games and instructional aids. More information is available at www.nurturing-parenting.com.

Program Implementation

Sites. The parenting classes were offered in schools, community centers, public health offices, family resource centers, and local agencies. Classes for teen parents were usually offered at teen parent programs or high schools. The classes for unmarried expectant parents were held at public health offices. Classes for incarcerated parents were held at state and federal prisons.

Retention. Several strategies were used to retain families. Parent educators mailed post cards each week to thank parents for coming, announce the topic for the upcoming class, and let parents know they were missed if absent.

They also called families before each class to encourage attendance. A graduation ceremony was held for those who completed at least 75% of the class sessions. The completion rate ranged from 33% to 100%, with an average completion rate across the 50 class series of 60%.

Totals. Fifty class series (each series consisting of 9 to 24 sessions) were completed in 14 counties in New Mexico. Almost 17,000 hours of education was provided to 660 parents and 816 children. (See Table 2.)

Table 1. Curriculum and Number of Classes per Series

CURRICULUM	CLASSES PER SERIES
Nurturing Program for Prenatal Families	9
Nurturing Program for Teenage Parents and Their Families	20
Nurturing Program for Parents and Their Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers	24
Nurturing Program for Parents and Their School-Age Children 5-11 Years	15
Nurturing Program for Parents and Their Adolescent Children 12-18 Years	12
Nurturing Program for Foster and Adoptive Parents	12
Nurturing Program for Families in Recovery from Substance Abuse	18

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The institutional review board at New Mexico State University (NMSU) approved the procedures, sampling plan, and instruments before data collection began. Parent educators were prepared for obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and keeping the data secure.

At the first class, parents were informed about the voluntary research project and given a consent form. Parents who consented received a packet of questionnaires to complete. Identification numbers were used instead of names to protect parents' privacy. At the last class, parents completed the same questionnaires.

Sample

Of the 660 parents who enrolled in the parenting classes, 573 agreed to participate in the study. However, if posttest data were missing or if more than 20% of the responses were incomplete, the individual was dropped from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 323 parents, or 56% of the available sample.

The participants were diverse. Although more mothers than fathers participated, 40% were men. Parents ranged in age from 14 to 70, with a median

age of 27. Most (60%) were Hispanic, although 10% were Native American. Almost half (46%) had not completed high school. Many did not complete the income question, but 84% reported a household income below the poverty line during program intake. The majority (58%) were single parents. The number of children ranged from one to nine, with a median of two children. See Table 3.

Instruments

Three questionnaires were administered at the first and last class. Parents completed the materials in either English or Spanish. Parent educators read items aloud for low-literacy individuals.

The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2) has five subscales: (a) inappropriate expectations of children; (b) lack of empathy towards children's needs; (c) strong belief in the use of corporal punishment; (d) reversing parent-child roles; and (e) oppressing children's power and independence (Bavolek & Keene, 1999). The AAPI-2 has 40 items and a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. For each subscale, raw scores are converted into standard scores ranging from 1 to 10. Low scores indicate a high risk for abusive or neglectful parenting. The internal reliability of the subscales ranged from .54 to .84.

The Nurturing Quiz (NQ) assesses parents' knowledge of effective discipline techniques such as praise, redirection, and consequences (Bavolek, 1984). For each item, there are four or five possible answers; only one is correct. There are different versions of the NQ depending on the age of the child. The three versions were the NQ for Prenatal Families (9 items), the NQ for Parents of Preschool Children (26 items), and the NQ for Parents of School-age Children (24 items). The split-half reliability of the three versions ranged from .54 to .84.

Table 2. Number of Class Series and Enrollment by Target Audience

TARGET AUDIENCE	CLASS SERIES	PARENTS	CHILDREN
Teen parents	11	125	60
Unmarried expectant parents	6	32	22
Single parents (Hispanic)	11	182	241
Single parents (Native American)	3	46	54
Divorced parents	1	10	16
Parents referred by social services	4	36	31
Foster parents	1	11	11
Families with substance abuse issues	1	7	6
Incarcerated parents	10	211	375
TOTAL	50	660	816

Note: Each class series lasts 9 to 24 weeks, depending on the curriculum.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics (N = 323)

CHARACTERISTIC	PERCENT %
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	60
Male	40
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
Hispanic	60
European American	21
Native American	10
African American	4
Asian American	1
Other	2
Not given	1
<i>Age</i>	
19 years and younger	23
20-29 years	24
30-39 years	27
40-49 years	12
50 years and older	3
Not given	1
<i>Education</i>	
Less than high school	46
High school graduate or GED	26
Some college	17
College graduate	5
Not given	6
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Single	58
Married	26
Divorced or Separated	15
Widowed	1
<i>Number of Children</i>	
Pregnant	18
1-2 children	51
3-4 children	24
5 or more children	4
Not given	3

The 34-item Family Social History Questionnaire (FSHQ) was used to gather information on the parent's age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, and income (Bavolek, 1984). Parents were asked to indicate the number and ages of their children.

RESULTS

A two-way (time x curriculum) analysis of variance was conducted for each of the subscales of the AAPI-2 and each version of the NQ. There were no significant main effects for curriculum, and no interaction effects. Therefore, only the main effects of time are presented in Table 4 and Table 5. All *p* values are one-tailed.

Posttest means were significantly higher than pretest means for the first AAPI construct, Inappropriate Expectations of Children (*p* = .00). The improvement was estimated to be 0.65 points on the 10-point scale. Posttest means also were significantly higher than pretest means for Lack of Empathy for Children's Needs (*p* = .01). The improvement was estimated to be 0.43. Parents exhibited a significant mean improvement from pretest to posttest on Strong Belief in the Use of Corporal Punishment (*p* = .00). The improvement was estimated to be .81. The improvement from pretest to posttest for Reversal of Parent-Child Roles (0.67) also was significant (*p* = .00). Finally, parents showed significant gains on the Oppression of Children's Power and Independence (*p* = .00). The improvement from pretest to posttest was .58.

Posttest means on the NQ for Prenatal Families were estimated to be 2.75 points higher than pretest means. This improvement was statistically significant (*p* = .05). On the NQ for Parents of Preschool Children, posttest means were 2.48 points higher (*p* = .00). Similarly, parents made

Table 4. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Means on the AAPI-2

SUBSCALE	PRETEST MEAN	POSTTEST MEAN	STANDARD ERROR	F	P
Inappropriate expectations	5.50	5.96	.13	26.65***	.00
Lack of empathy	5.55	5.98	.14	9.14**	.01
Corporal punishment	5.60	6.41	.15	29.79***	.00
Reversing roles	4.91	5.58	.12	32.31***	.00
Oppression of power	5.37	5.96	.14	16.97***	.00

Note: ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001

Table 5. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Means on the Nurturing Quiz

VERSION	PRETEST MEAN	POSTTEST MEAN	STANDARD ERROR	F	P
Prenatal	6.00	8.75	1.16	5.61*	.05
Preschool children	15.14	17.62	.29	70.78***	.00
School-age children	14.36	16.55	.40	29.47***	.00

Note: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

significant gains (2.19 points) on the NQ for Parents of School-Age Children ($p = .00$).

DISCUSSION

The Strengthening Families Initiative was developed to provide intensive parenting education to high-risk families in New Mexico. Parents with limited resources, low social support, and high levels of stress were recruited for parenting classes lasting 9 to 24 weeks. Curricula from the Nurturing Parenting Program were used. The average completion rate was 60%.

Parents showed significant improvements in their empathy for children's needs and knowledge of positive discipline techniques. They reported significant decreases in parent-child role reversals, inappropriate expectations of children, belief in corporal punishment, and restriction of children's independence. Prior research has demonstrated that parents with these characteristics raise well-adjusted, competent children (Baumrind, 1967, 1973, 1989).

Parents showed significant improvements in their empathy for children's needs and knowledge of positive discipline techniques.

The project had several strengths. Much of the previous research utilized European American, middle-class mothers. The participants in this study were low-income, ethnic minority parents. Pretest and posttest measures were administered rather than relying on a posttest only design. Finally, an evidence-based curriculum with valid, reliable instruments was used.

Group parent education is an effective format for high-risk audiences. One advantage is the social support offered by other parents. The combination of economic deprivation and low support creates a potentially dangerous situation for children (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992). The support from a parenting class that meets 2 to 6 months helps buffer families from stress and reduces the likelihood of abuse. Offering classes within the community increases program participation and the likelihood of sustaining support. Also, group parent education is cost-effective. It would be expensive to deliver the same number of instructional hours on an individual basis. Finally, group parent education provides many opportunities to learn new skills. Parents practice skills during class, apply the skills at home, and then discuss challenges at the next session. Parents also are available for re-teaching.

When working with high-risk families, it is important to address self-nurturing. Self-care is a foreign concept to many low-income families because they are overwhelmed with daily tasks and feel unable to provide for their own needs (Webster-Stratton, 1997). However, when parents nurture themselves, they are better able to nurture their children.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FOR FCS PROFESSIONALS

Family and consumer sciences (FCS) professionals have a vital role in strengthening families through parenting education. FCS professionals have the background in child development, parenting, family dynamics, family resource management, nutrition, and teaching methods to address the multiple needs of high-risk families. FCS professionals are equipped to deliver comprehensive programs to the entire family, and conduct rigorous evaluations of program effectiveness.

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