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Parenting Needs as Perceived by Agency Personnel Working with Parents and Young Children in Southern Nevada

Abstract

Extension educators have used different methods to collect information for a needs assessment, including advisory committees, survey questionnaires, focus groups, interviews with key informants, or a combination of the former. This article describes the use of key informant interviews (agency personnel working with parents and young children) that investigated concerns about parents and needs of parents in their community, and summarizes issues uncovered related to family, agency, and community. Results identify important implications for the development of parenting programming with parents of young children and more in-depth future parenting education research.

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Introduction

Children's first 6 years of life have a significant effect on their development, and parents play the most important role in that process (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2002; Shonkoff, 2009). The quality of parent-child interactions profoundly influences early development. Thus, when Extension specialists from across the country developed the National Extension Parent Education Model in the 1990's (DeBord et al., 2006; Smith, Cudaback, Goddard, & Myers-Walls, 1994), they not only recognized the important role that parents play in children's development but also believed that parenting is a learned skill that can be strengthened through education and experience. Earlier parenting studies supported the model by showing how effective parenting education programs are in improving parenting skills and children's behaviors (Degarmo, Patterson, & Forgatch, 2004; Hodnett, Faulk, Dellinger, & Maher, 2009). According to DeBord, Heath, McDermott, and Wolfe (2000), parents need support like this in raising their own children regardless of their socioeconomic position or culture. Today's parents face many challenges and often do not know how and where to turn for help.

The Cooperative Extension Service has a long history of providing research-based educational programs to people in communities in need. Extension educators conduct needs assessments to learn about issues perceived by our public as important in order to design effective programs (McCawley,

2009). In order for Extension educators to develop new parenting programs or maintain existing programs, it is necessary to identify specific parenting needs in the area. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on parenting needs in the community, and there are many parenting programs not reflecting the needs of the community (Ontai & Mastergeorge, 2006).

Interviews with key informants who have knowledge and experience in early childhood can be very helpful in understanding parenting needs in the community. Semi-structured interviews with agency personnel working with young children and their families in the community were carried out to uncover what these personnel identify as unmet needs in parenting young children.

Methods

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 agency staff who have served young children (0 to 5 years of age) and families in southern Nevada. These key informants were from a variety of agencies and organizations, including nonprofit agency (51%), state agency (14%), library (11%), school district (9%), early intervention agency (6%), county agency (3%), community center (3%), and Head Start (3%). A snowball sampling was used to identify these personnel for the interview. Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects. Snowball sampling is known to be a useful tool for locating information-rich key informants. The Extension specialist generated an initial list of potential participants and contacted them by telephone to invite them to participate. During each interview, interviewees were asked to identify other potential agency personnel who might participate, so most of the early childhood-related agency personnel were recruited. Recruitment continued until no new issues emerged from the interviews.

There was considerable demographic diversity among agency personnel who were interviewed. Among the 35 interviewees, 21 were Caucasian, five were Latino/Hispanic, eight were African American, and one was Asian. Thirty-three were females, and two were males. (There are traditionally more women in this field than men.) Twenty-seven interviews were conducted with individuals who were located in urban areas, and eight interviews were undertaken with personnel in rural areas. About half of the interviewees worked for a nonprofit agency, and most of them worked for underrepresented populations.

A total of four questions were asked of each interviewee: 1) their current responsibilities, 2) programs/services they provide for parents and their young children, 3) major issues or needs of parents with young children in each community, and 4) other possible interviewees.

Participants identified a total of 100 issues and gaps in parenting education for parents of young children in southern Nevada. To summarize this information, the 100 individual items were repeatedly grouped with other similar issues until all items were categorized. This resulted in a list of 30 issues mentioned by more than one interviewee. Those 30 issues were further sorted into three content-related categories: family (20 items), agency (5 items), and community (5 items). Then the issues under each content-related category were ranked by the percentage of respondents who identified each issue.

Findings

Family

Among 30 issues, 20 issues were sorted into family-related category, and those 20 issues were categorized into six topic areas (Table 1). When participants reflected on the knowledge gaps parents of young children in southern Nevada may have, a number of issues surfaced. Several agency personnel thought that parents needed to understand age-appropriate child development. Most thought that a lack of knowledge about typical development could lead to unrealistic expectations—expecting too much or too little—which, in turn, could lead to child abuse and neglect. In addition, they pointed out that parents can facilitate children's healthy development by understanding developmental milestones. Twenty-three percent of the interviewees thought that families in their communities needed to get nutrition information/education. The respondents strongly believed that the need for nutrition education is more crucial now than ever to prevent childhood obesity and encourage healthy eating habits, especially for parents of young children.

The need for parent education programs to improve parenting skills was frequently voiced. Almost half of the agency personnel stated that their community needs to increase both the quantity and diversity of parenting education opportunities. They reported that this is an even greater problem in small communities because, currently, there are few, if any parent education workshops available in most rural areas in southern Nevada.

Agency personnel also said that more opportunities for parents to meet with each other to gain social support are needed. Parents can learn from each other by sharing their own parenting experiences and can support each other by sharing feelings, problems, and successes related to parenting. Parents might meet other parents at parenting workshops, their child's preschool or childcare programs, local playgrounds, and local events.

More than one third of participants also felt that parents in southern Nevada needed to build their own education/skills to raise their children well. It was suggested that parents learn English, improve their basic academic skills, and gain life skills so they can get family-supporting jobs and help their children succeed in school. Interviewees were particularly concerned about English language learner parents and felt their inability to speak English could limit their job opportunities and prevent them from adequately helping their children in school as they grow older.

It was also suggested by some agency personnel that parents need to better understand their roles and responsibilities as parents. The population of southern Nevada is very transient. Many people move to the area, and many do not have family support. To understand their role as parents of young children, they need someone to model parenting behaviors or guide them to be effective parents. Community members, such as parenting educators, preschool teachers, or agency personnel might play this role for parents, in the absence of their own families. A small number of those interviewed mentioned that specialized parenting programs are needed for specific audiences. Agency personnel most frequently mentioned the need for parenting resources and education for adolescent mothers.

Table 1.

Family-Related Issues Identified by Agency Personnel (N = 35)

Ranking	Family-Related Issues	Number	Percent
	Knowledge		
1	Helping parents understand appropriate child development for each age	22	63
2	Having families get nutrition information/education	8	23
3	Ensuring that parents know and understand the prekindergarten standards	4	11
4	Having families get health information/education	2	6
5	Helping parents understand the importance of play at younger age	2	6
6	Helping parents understand the importance of family routines	2	6
	Skills		
1	Providing opportunities for enhancing general parenting skills through parenting education workshops	15	43
2	Helping parents learn how to discipline children without punishment, when dealing with children's problem behaviors	9	26
3	Helping parents improve their child's language development for later success	5	14
4	Helping parents to participate in their child's schools (preschools, day care)	4	11
5	Helping parents learn how to spend high-quality time with their children	3	9
	Social Support		
1	Providing opportunities for parents to meet with other parents to develop networks or support, or learn from each other	15	43
2	Providing more recreation opportunities for young children and their family	9	26
	Self-Care/Development		
1	Parents building their own education/skills	13	37
2	Helping parents relieve stress	2	6
	Self-Management/Motivation		
1	Encouraging parents to understand their role as parents	8	23
2	Helping parents become motivated to learn parenting skills	5	14
	Different Audiences		

1	Parenting education/resources for teenage moms	6	16
2	Parenting education/resources for grandparents raising grandchildren	2	6
3	Parenting education/resources for middle class families	2	6

Agency

Among 30 issues, five issues were sorted into agency-related category, and they were about how agencies could better help parents and families of young children (Table 2). Almost half of the participants suggested that it is necessary to help families find available resources in their communities. According to agency personnel who were interviewed, parents often did not know about existing resources, whether they needed the service, or whether they were eligible for the program. This leads almost one quarter of the agency personnel to suggest the need to increase collaboration among agencies serving young children and their parents. Through collaboration, agencies may be better able to refer parents to programs that would provide the resources and services that they need.

Table 2.

Agency-Related Issues Identified by Agency Personnel (N = 35)

Ranking	Agency-Related Issues	Number	Percent
1	Each agency needs to help parents find available resources in the community	16	46
2	There needs to be more collaboration among agencies	8	23
3	Each agency needs to increase awareness of cultural diversity, sensitivity, and strengths	3	9
4	Each agency needs to provide family-friendly environments	2	6
5	Each agency needs to provide any kinds of follow-up services to families who receive their services	2	6

Community

Among 30 issues, five issues were sorted into community-related category, and they were about how the greater community could support parents and families of young children (Table 3). More than half of the participants believed that meeting the basic needs of families should be a community priority. A number of interviewees mentioned that numerous families in their communities are currently experiencing economic downturns; many have lost jobs, homes, and health insurance. They are struggling to meet their families' basic needs. There was no further elaboration on how the community at large can/should help. In addition, another issue expressed was the need for high-quality and affordable childcare programs. In some rural areas, there were few, if any, early care and education programs for young children and parents. Although there were many childcare programs available in urban areas, according to agency personnel, many families could not afford to pay the

tuition for their children.

Table 3.
Community-Related Issues Identified by Agency Personnel (N = 35)

Ranking	Issues	Number	Percent
1	Having basic needs of families met (health care, nutrition, housing)	22	63
2	Providing high-quality and affordable child care for children and families	16	46
3	Providing transportation services to families, when they need access to any kinds of services	14	40
4	Providing free or low-cost mental health services for both parents and young children	6	17
5	Resolving family conflict/domestic violence	3	9

Rural vs. Urban

Key informants in urban and rural areas agreed that parents of young children who need help are not getting it. However, the reason they are not getting help differs according to geographical location. In rural areas, there is an issue of availability. In urban areas, programs are available, but not well advertised.

Few public or private services are available in rural areas. Agency personnel reported a lack of medical care, early intervention services, jobs, access to child care, food and household items, parent education, and many more services. Meeting the basic needs of families and providing transportation were mentioned by 75% and 63% of the respondents in rural areas, respectively.

On the other hand, agency personnel in urban areas more frequently mentioned the need to help parents find available resources in the community. Parents have access to these programs, but do not know it, or do not know how to navigate the system. This was mentioned by 52% of the respondents in urban areas, compared to only 25% of the respondents in rural areas.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings of the study reported here, the following recommendations are made.

- Extension could develop diverse parenting programming that provides opportunities for parents of young children to learn about child development and cultivate parenting skills that affect their everyday lives.
- Each agency needs to help parents find available resources in the community in collaboration with other agencies, and the community as a whole needs to help meet basic needs of families.

Although there are many resources in urban areas, agency people in urban areas thought that their parents do not know how or where to find them. Conversely, parents in rural areas may know where to find resources, but they are limited. Extension educators need to use different strategies for parents in different areas.

Implications

Undoubtedly, Extension cannot provide all parenting education programs or services for all parents of young children in the community. Particularly in troubled economic times, collaboration with other community-based organizations can help meet a greater number of needs. Pooling resources with other agencies might help develop parenting programs that neither organization could do by itself or help parents better locate available resources in the community. For example, Extension can provide parenting resources through fact sheets and brief reports online, and other agencies can share those parenting information with parents.

Although the needs revealed through this exploratory qualitative study are specific to the participants from agencies working for young children and their parents, evidence has shown that interviewing key informants provides very accurate information about the needs of the community (McCaslin & Tibeziinda, 1997). Key informants, such as agency personnel, are sometimes more accurate than parents in their perception of parenting needs, especially when they have a long history of working with parents and their young children. These results provide not only the basis for future development of parenting education programs, but also the basis for further parenting education research with parents of young children collecting questionnaire responses from a large number of parents.

Finally, the study reported here is limited to one state and even then, only the southern region, so caution should be used in generalizing our findings to other states. However, the participants of the study included key informants from not only urban areas, but also from rural areas. Therefore, the results from the study may serve to inform current Extension educators in other states about how to address issues in various residential areas.

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