

10-1-2013

The Family-Environment Connection: Filling a Nationwide Program Gap

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Recommended Citation

Santiago, A., Franz, N., Christoffel, R., Cooper, K., & Schmitt, B. K. (2013). The Family-Environment Connection: Filling a Nationwide Program Gap. *The Journal of Extension*, 51(5), Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.51.05.19>

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Abstract

Since its inception, Extension has focused on helping individuals, families, and communities change economic, environmental, and social conditions. Over the organization's history, environmental condition change programming has been mostly the purview of natural resource educators and less often conducted by family and consumer science professionals. There is no evidence of a comprehensive approach to environmental education in Extension linked to family development. In addition, no evidence was found of any Extension educators conducting environmental education with the family unit as the audience. The Family-Environment Connection initiative created by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach aims to fill this gap.

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Introduction

Since its inception, Extension has focused on helping individuals, families, and communities change economic, environmental, and social conditions. Over the organization's 100-year history, environmental condition change programming has been mostly the purview of natural resource educators and less often conducted by family and consumer science professionals. Based on literature reviews and interviewing of coworkers, there is no evidence of a comprehensive approach to environmental education in Extension linked directly to family development theory. In addition, no evidence was found of any Extension educators outside FCS conducting environmental education with the family unit as the audience. Programs instead have focused on individuals, organizations, or communities as the educational audience (Drill, Surls, Aliaga, & DiGiovanni, 2009; Mengak, Rutledge, & McDonald, 2009). This gap in Extension programming is disturbing because an interdisciplinary approach to Extension education has been promoted for several decades (Guion, 2010; Duncan &

Foster, 1996).

Literature Review

Extension educators have approached environmental education most often from their specific discipline within their state or across states (Mengak, Rutledge, & McDonal, 2009). Some educators have brought together several disciplines within their program unit to conduct environmental education (Poorman & Webster, 2010). Some Extension educators have worked across program units to address particular environmental issues such as civic ecology (Krasny & Tidball, 2010) and sustainability (Elliott et al., 2008).

No Extension studies or practices were found related to environmental education for families or family development. However, several articles were located that support environmental education as part of the family and consumer science profession (Koonce, Turner, & Chapman, 2011; Makela, 2003; Thompson, Harden, Clauss, & Wild, 2012) or the family as an audience for leisure education (Garst, Baughman, Franz, & Seidel, [in press]). One research team was located at the University of Nevada Las Vegas working to create an "eco-informed" approach to marriage and family therapy (Blumer, Hertlein, & Fife, 2012) based on work by Loaszloffy (2009), who promotes training for marriage and family therapists through integrative healing for families at the individual, family and environmental levels.

Filling the Programmatic Gap—Practice Leads Theory

In 2011 a team of 13 Iowa State University Extension and Outreach faculty and staff gathered to review past research, practices, and stakeholder needs in environmental education related to family environmental education. Five faculty and staff from this original group with expertise in conservation programs, nature mapping, family life, family finance, nutrition and health, to name a few, emerged as a core work team to implement the vision. Consequently, a new initiative was created within the ISU Extension and Outreach to Families unit to support family-based environmental education called the "Family-Environment Connection." Since then, the team has created and implemented an Eco Family blog (blogs.extension.iastate.edu/isuecofamily), Facebook page (ISUEcoFamily), twitter feed (EcoFamilyISU) (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/ISUEco-Family/285196828171260>), and a series of six Adobe Connect webinars.

The above online presence facilitates platform for like-minded individuals to gather and share eco-friendly practices. For example, in one blog posting information about how to grow medicinal herbs was presented, and additional resources were shared such as Extension and Outreach hotlines. The 2012 adobe Connect webinars focused on local food systems, connecting with nature, green schools, water/rainscaping, edible landscapes, and composting. The 2013 webinars include sessions on water, living green, energy, stuff, food, and neighbors. The topics are aimed at helping families learn ways to conserve water and energy, spend time outdoors, live simply, promote local food, and engage in neighborhood initiatives to reduce ecological footprints. The website, blog, and twitter feeds also promote the webinars to complement other recruitment efforts.

To date over 70 people have subscribed to the blog and twitter account, and 26 families participated in the webinars. In addition, a new webinar series is underway. The team is also working to secure

funding to create online environmental education modules designed for families with a goal of family development. Several grant proposals were submitted to the Iowa Energy Center, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture-Ecology. The team's efforts have gained the interest of Extension educators nationally. Team members have shared their work at the National Extension Urban Conference, eXtension Communities of Practice Conference, and National Outreach Scholarship Conference.

Lessons Learned

The Family-Environment Connection program team has experienced a variety of joys and challenges in this groundbreaking work.

- It can be difficult to create a research base that reflects the family development process taking place through environmental education. As revealed by the literature review, there is a lack of a unifying theoretical and conceptual framework to guide research and practice in this area. We are developing a model for this work similar to the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model (www.nermen.org) as the theory base for our efforts.
- Innovative and truly interdisciplinary efforts without a research base make it difficult to secure funding for program efforts. Constant education of partners and coworkers is needed to help others see the uniqueness and value of this work.
- Don't underestimate the power of social media and the online environment to start a project and reach new Extension audiences.
- The development and use of a logic model to plan and market this work has been valuable to bring faculty, staff, and partners from a variety of backgrounds into our efforts and to promote our work.
- Faculty and staff need a variety of levels and options for participation in this work to fit their busy professional lives and program portfolios.
- Given the lack of research and programmatic efforts, institutional support at the unit level is valuable to initially bring together interested faculty and staff. From the initial efforts, seeds for this programming have been sown and are starting to grow.

Next Steps

The Family-Environment Connection initiative team will continue to explore the intersection of environmental education and family development with the outcome of providing a more holistic approach to environmental condition change. In addition, the team will continue with webinars, blogs, and twitter feeds especially given the high costs of conducting and participating in face-to-face training and the convenience for families to participate wherever they are. The online means of education and interaction has a favorable cost-benefit ratio for all involved, not only in terms of time, energy, and monetary cost, but also in terms of minimal carbon footprints and usage of

natural resources like trees. In the 2013 webinar series, innovative ideas such as a flipped class model (prerecorded lectures followed by in-class exercises) and virtual Super Heroes (avatars) were introduced. Since these classes are recorded they can be replicated easily.

Because these efforts are currently funded solely through institutional support, external funding will provide additional excitement and impact by helping educate partners and facilitate buy in. The team will also continue to develop and share a model for this new work as best practices and lessons are learned and to catalyze this work across the country. Finally, the team has planned for and begun to collect data on the private and public outcomes of this work to determine how to best proceed. Some of this data will be shared in upcoming local and national conferences. Slowly and with great passion we are attempting to fill a gap in national Extension programming.

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