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Incorporating Parental Goals in Parenting Programs Through Collaborative Relationships with Parents

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Incorporating Parental Goals in Parenting Programs Through Collaborative Relationships with Parents

Abstract

This article makes a case for including parental input, specifically parenting goals, in parenting programs. Research indicates goals directly influence parenting practices. Collaborative discussion about parent goals can better involve parents in the parenting education process, and, through the connection with practices, improve outcomes. Three categories of collaboration are described.

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Introduction

Parent education has been identified as an important national priority (Kagan, 1995). However, parent educators commonly say that programming does not reach the audience it most needs to reach (DeBord, Roseboro, & Wicker, 1998). DeBord and colleagues (2001) show that a collaborative approach increases the reach of a program.

Research suggests that effective parent education involves assisting parents to meet their goals (DeBord & Matta, n.d.; Martinez & Velazquez, 2000). Collaborative discussion of those goals helps parenting, because parent goals influence parenting behavior (Fox, 1999; LeVine & LeVine, 1988; Kohn, 1979). This article details evidence of the influence of goals on parenting practices and provides suggestions for incorporating parent goals into parenting programs.

Parenting Goals and Practices: What We Know

Over several years, Robert and Sarah LeVine (1988) watched the Gusii of Kenya change their parenting goals and change their practices to match their new goals. The Gusii, traditionally agrarian, changed their goals from wanting children to farm to wanting children to get jobs in the growing cities. They realized that the best chance for their children to be successful would be found in the cities. As a result, Gusii parents began sending their children to formal schooling for longer periods of time and more often. This change was difficult; parents relinquished traditional control over their children and had less labor for their own livelihood. The Gusii's changes in the face of problems illustrate the power of parenting goals.

In the United States, Melvin Kohn (1979) demonstrated that class influenced parenting goals. He found that parents in middle class families valued independence, while parents in working-class families valued conformity and obedience. Similarly, Luster and colleagues (1989) found that working-class parents used more physical punishment, restrained children's actions more often, and put greater emphasis on enforcing rules as a means of guiding children than did other parents.

Further research has replicated and extended this work. Parents from south-central Virginia who endorsed more authoritarian goals for their children engaged in more authoritarian practices (Fox, 1999). Examples of these practices include physical punishments and not allowing children to question decisions (Fox, 1999). Parents who endorsed goals of independence used parenting practices that encouraged independence. Examples of these practices include respecting the

child's opinion and allowing the child to make decisions for themselves (Fox, 1999).

Suggestions for Practice

There are a number of ways in which collaboration can be used to include parental goals. The following describes some common issues and three possible ways to make parenting programs more collaborative.

Common Issues

Clear, jargon-free, speech helps parents to understand and to feel included (Smith, 2001). As well, careful listening and asking about cultural differences also communicate acceptance and interest (Ferguson & Townsend-Butterworth, 1996; Martinez & Velazquez; 2001). Another common issue is that all collaborative approaches must recognize that parents have unique knowledge about their child (Ferguson & Townsend-Butterworth, 1996).

Soliciting Goals

The facilitator asks parents to elaborate their goals; she may also assist with clarification. She then can demonstrate how a program can help parents meet those goals. One goal may be success in school. The parent educator could then indicate the benefits *for school performance* of an authoritative style (e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). Gordon and Miller (2003) found such an opportunity to contribute substantially improved parental satisfaction in creating Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs); similar outcomes should occur in a parenting program.

Modifying Programs

A more involved collaboration involves modifying a parenting program to better fit goals. Such collaboration is particularly important when implementing pre-packaged programs such as STEP (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1989) or the Nurturing Program (Bavolek & Comstock, 1991). Independence from parents is valued in both programs but is not valued in many cultures, such as Chinese-American (Fulgini, Yip, & Tseng, 2002; Stevenson, Chen, & Lee, 1992) and Italian-American (Rubin, 1994). Acknowledging family goals instead of individual would be more culturally congruent and improve outcomes. Similarly, Snell-Johns, Mendez, and Smith (2004) report on an effective collaborative family therapy model. Parents chose their own goals and used workbooks and telephone conversations with family therapists for assistance in meeting those goals.

Another example of modifying a program is the creation of an IEP. Parents, teachers, and other professionals collaborate to create a plan for the child's education (Smith, 2001). Parents share their expectations of the child and indicate how they can help achieve those expectations (Smith, 2001). Such a process represents a modification because most of the outcome is still determined by experts.

Co-Creating Programs

A third degree of collaboration involves inviting parents to co-create the program. In this example, parents and educator work together from the beginning to construct an experience that is tailored to the needs generated by parental goals. Such a program may begin with, "How can I, as educator, help you meet your goals?" While the educator remains a source of knowledge, that knowledge emerges in service of parental goals, helping parents to both be more effective and exercise greater control.

An example of this approach is Comer's School Development Program, in which parents are involved not only in the program's daily work, but also in governance (Ferguson & Townsend-Butterworth, 1996). Parents thus decide on major issues of the program, rather than having a pre-defined role (Ferguson & Townsend-Butterworth, 1996). This level of collaboration, however, may have limited applicability. A group of parents who are overwhelmed by the tasks of parenting may feel less able to be so involved.

Conclusion

Parents actively construct their children's environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1990). Collaboration can help parents become true partners in parent education and harness that active processing to improve program outcomes. Such work validates family diversity and focuses attention on the primary goal: improving children's lives.

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