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## Communicating Program Value of Family Life and Parenting Education Programs to Decision Makers

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## Communicating Program Value of Family Life and Parenting Education Programs to Decision Makers

### Abstract

In tight budgetary times, prevention and community education programs are often the first targets on the budgetary cutting block. Documenting the effects of prevention has always been difficult. However, educating Extension advocacy networks and local budgetary decision makers is critical to help convey program value to the public and to program participants. This article challenges Family Life Extension educators to collectively arrive at some strategies to convey the value of prevention education in communities and presents two examples of ways to explain program impact.

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Prevention education programs are designed to prevent the likelihood that someone will need more costly intervention or remediation. Parenting education, health and wellness education programs, early childhood education, or family literacy programs are examples of programs designed to prevent child abuse, create healthy family relationships, teach health practices, keep youth in school, and prevent substance abuse or early pregnancy. However, in tight budgetary times, prevention education programs often become the first targets on the budgetary cutting block. To relieve pressing societal needs, intervention programs, such as substance abuse treatment programs, juvenile justice programs, alternative schools, or job training programs, become prioritized.

Documenting the impact of prevention programs and justifying investment in them is difficult. The savings to taxpayers must be couched in terms of the potential savings in later remediation and intervention. Elected officials rarely are interested in how many people attended, that the participants rated sessions as positive, or even that participants hope to incorporate a new skill they learned. They want to know what programs cost and compare this to how they are beneficial to the economy or to their local budgets.

One model (Kalambokidis, 2004) indicates that when a service is recognized as having significant public value, the value is stated when even citizens who do not directly benefit from the service will endorse its public funding. One example is taxpayer dollars funding public schools. Schools serve the greater good. Family life and parenting education programs that are publicly funded also meet the definition Kalambokidis (2004) gives for serving the public good when the community realizes the spillover benefits of the program in their communities.

One method of justifying program need is to apply cost benefit formulas. However, cost-benefit models are complex, and projections are generally derived through randomized designs. Subsequent educational programs, then, must be implemented according to a similar design as the original study to realize the same affects (Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, & Penucci, 2004). This is complicated further when considering that causal inference is difficult in socially embedded programs. To claim that one sole program resulted in lowered child abuse or minimized teen school dropout is generally inappropriate. Further, since Cooperative Extension often partners with multiple community agencies, credit for successful outcomes often goes to partnering agencies. How then, can educational program value be communicated in understandable terms?

Using Longitudinal Data to support Family Life and Parenting Education Programming

Using existing longitudinal data, a review of longitudinal studies that document the effects of high quality early childhood education and parenting skills training programs helps provide program value justification. The difficulty in justification is that there is not an immediate return on the expenditure. For example, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993) followed children until they were 21 years old, finding that for every dollar invested in high quality preschool programs, about \$7.00 is returned to society in eventual savings from averted crime, remedial service, and child welfare services.

Similarly, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers program (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002) illustrated the cost-benefit of programs that included parenting education components. These programs resulted in reduced expenditures for school remedial services, for criminal justice, and child welfare. While averting tangible costs to victims of crime and maltreatment, the programs increased the earnings capacity of program participants who then contributed to the tax base.

Prevent Child Abuse America offered an extensive cost analysis (Fromm, 2001). The report focused on abused and neglected children who are more likely to suffer from depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, severe obesity; require special education in school; and become juvenile delinquents and adult criminals. Estimated annual costs of abuse were examined and included costs to the judicial system, law enforcement, and mental health ranging from \$14.4 billion to the child welfare system to over \$6 Billion in hospitalization costs nationally.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy asked the question "does prevention pay?" (Cohen, 1998). They concluded that well-implemented programs could achieve significantly more benefits than cost (Aos, Leib, Mayfield, Miller, & Penucci, 2004). But they issue a call for more rigorous evaluation and warn that without program fidelity, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether a program produces positive or negative returns for taxpayers.

### How to Communicate Program Value

As is often required, communicating with local decision makers in sound bytes about program value is less than satisfactory. A concise formula is not available, however this author challenges others to build on the following notions to collectively arrive at some strategies to convey the value of prevention education in communities.

Local Extension staff must truly deliver research-based programs. This practice must be extended beyond delivering research-based facts to delivering educational programs according to best program delivery practices. One example from the field of parenting education is research specifying that parents who participate for a longer duration (6 months-2 years) and who used all services offered (at least three-five programs) had better outcomes than those receiving less intense and shorter term services (Whipple & Wilson, 1996). Many of our current parenting education programs are 2-hour sessions offered once or series of six or eight sessions. Six to 8 weeks is a large investment of staff time, but it will result in little change in parent behavior.

Extension Advisory Councils should be carefully reviewed to assure they are comprised of people who truly understand the value of the programs and can defend this value. In 1992, Black, Howe, Howell, and Becker stated that Extension can no longer afford to use advisory councils simply as a grassroots advocacy base. The councils must be used to ensure Extension programming is germane to the needs of the people and the programming efforts are effective. Thus, members must actively advocate for programs that meet public need while understanding program goals. Building a foundation of informed supporters may require content-related training for members.

When developing justification for investments in family life education programs, concisely compare the cost of what may happen if prevention education were not in place. Consider presenting decision makers (including Advisory Councils) with national, statewide, or local statistics to explain prevention program efforts. Two ways to explain program impact follow.

### Example 1

Parenting education is a program that serves the public good. Parents who lack an understanding of their children's developmental stages, who hold unreasonable expectations for their child's abilities, or who are unaware of effective discipline strategies, may be abusive or neglectful. Prevention activities such as parent education, home visitation, and parent support groups, provide many families the support they need to stay together and care for their children in their homes and communities (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information). Communities with parents who exercise poor parenting skills are at potential risk for negative outcomes, including school failure and juvenile criminal activity such as vandalism or gang association.

Nationally, 12 in 1,000 children are abused annually (National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, 1999). If children are abused, placement of children in foster care is needed, which costs approximately \$23.75 per child per day (Honig & Morin, 1996). If children are abused, they are more likely to turn to illegal acts. Incarceration of a young adult varies from state to state. The cost in North Carolina is approximately \$62.43 per inmate per day (NC Department of Corrections).

Applying national child abuse figures to local programming may work out as such: An outreach program similar to that reduces abuse in parents served parents of 300 children in a given year.

This intense program statistically may have deterred 4.2 children from being abused.

The cost savings would be calculated as such:

4.2 children X 23.75 (foster care factor) = \$99.75 per day

The average stay in foster care is 2 years (730 days).

730 X 99.75 = \$72,818

This would yield a foster care cost savings of \$72,818 for 2 years or \$36,409 for one year.

## Example 2

Approximately 97 per 1,000 women (9%) aged 15-19 become pregnant each year. The majority (78%) of these pregnancies are unintended. Comprehensive public education campaigns that address decision making, human sexuality, and human relationships have been shown to reduce long-term welfare dependency and discourage out-of-wedlock childbearing (National Governor's Association, 1996). Every \$1 invested on publicly subsidized family planning services saves \$4.40 on costs that otherwise would be spent on medical care, welfare benefits, and other social services to women who became pregnant and gave birth (Donovan, 1995).

In a local program serving 500 teens, 4 hours per month for 6 months was invested. At \$50 per hour professional time, the cost was \$1,200. Applying the cost savings of \$4.40 for every dollar invested resulted in a program value of \$5,280 and a benefit of \$4,080 (difference of \$5,280 minus \$1,200).

The public value of teen pregnancy prevention has larger spill-over effects to the community. Teenage pregnancy poses a substantial financial burden to society, estimated at \$7 billion annually in lost tax revenues, public assistance, child health care, foster care, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Teen mothers are less likely to graduate from high school and more likely than their peers, who delay childbearing, to live in poverty and to rely on welfare. The children of teenage mothers are often born at low birth weight, experience health and developmental problems, and frequently are poor, abused, and/or neglected (Kahn, Brindis, & Gleib, 1999).

## Summary

Family Life Extension educators must be diligent in conveying to others how critical prevention education programs are to communities and society. Conveying messages about program value requires informed reporting and a detailed application of existing longitudinal studies to build a case for projected savings to the community. In addition to using succinct descriptions to describe prevention programming, a strong message about the public value of programs can be used to garner public support and justify public funding.

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