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ParentNet: A Community Response to Parenting Education

Cathy Malley

Cooperative Extension Service, catherine.malley@uconn.edu



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ParentNet: A Community Response to Parenting Education

Abstract

This article describes the creation and implementation of an ongoing parenting education initiative in Danbury, Connecticut. It includes information about community needs, coalition building, and a curriculum and process for community-based parenting programs. It describes the important role that Cooperative Extension Educators can take in providing leadership in building and maintaining coalitions that help parents, children, families, and communities.

Cathy Malley

Extension Educator
University of Connecticut
Cooperative Extension System
Bethel, Connecticut
catherine.malley@uconn.edu

ParentNet was created in 1997 to meet a community need in Danbury, Connecticut for parenting education that is ongoing, high quality, affordable, and accessible. Past parenting education efforts had not always been effective or consistently available. Progress towards improved parent-child relationships and reunification was inadequate, especially when parent education was court mandated.

Background

Danbury's high school has identified more than 40 languages spoken by its students (*Images of America*, Danbury Museum and Historical Society 2001). This number reflects the rich diversity of a city that has become home to more than 16,000 immigrants in the past decade. This immigration pattern has created cultural and language barrier challenges for families. Families need support related to parenting while adjusting to a new community and culture. The number of parents seeking parenting education has risen due to increases in the following:

- Children in out-of-home placement;
- Parents in prisons or rehabilitation programs;
- Parents who are court mandated to participate in parenting classes;
- Separations and divorces; and
- One-parent families including teen mothers.

Project Design

A community planning team (ParentNet team), comprised of The Regional Child Advocacy Center, Children First, Head Start, The Community Resource Center of Danbury Public Schools, and Danbury Youth Services, created ParentNet. The goal of ParentNet is to enable parents to use better parenting practices. Participating parents learn new information about parenting and child development, practice new parenting skills, and share strategies with a parent educator and other parents. The ParentNet program was designed as an ongoing 10-week series of 2-hour classes taught by area professionals. Experienced facilitators recommend that for optimal interaction class size be 10-15 parents. ParentNet was promoted through family-service agencies, schools, and media, and by referrals.

The curriculum, Parenting People, developed by the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, was selected for use because it is comprehensive, research based, and easy to use. Parenting People has been successfully piloted with parents who are ethnically, educationally, and geographically diverse. It includes information and skill development activities in the following areas: Parenting Styles, Child Development, Communication, and Guidance and Discipline. The curriculum contains forms and instruments helpful in conducting and evaluating workshops.

Potential Barriers

The ParentNet team anticipated the following barriers that are common to parenting projects.

- The inability of community-based agencies to take on responsibilities for new programs, e.g., recruitment, program management, and implementation;
- Program inaccessibility--many parenting programs are conducted at times and locations that are not easily accessible to parents;
- Inadequate childcare--most parenting programs do not provide child care or stipends for care;
- Fees--many parenting programs charge fees that families cannot pay;
- Language barriers--existing programs were conducted in English with no translators available.

The ParentNet team addressed these potential barriers as follows.

- A local child/family-serving agency volunteered to take responsibility for ParentNet. This agency's mission includes prevention work with high-risk parents and is compatible with ParentNet goals. The team secured a grant for "start up" funding so the agency could implement ParentNet;
- Free transportation is available to participants through staff rides or taxi vouchers;
- The program fee is limited to \$5 per individual or couple, with scholarships available;
- Childcare is provided by staff. Liability for childcare is covered by the sponsoring agency.
- A light dinner or refreshments are provided for parents and children;
- Classes are facilitated in English, Spanish and Portuguese;
- Class locations rotate throughout the city, including sites at public schools, library, community resource center, public housing community centers, and agency offices.

Factors Contributing to Success

The success of ParentNet can be attributed to the following.

- Strong community collaborations. Successful collaborations are the foundation for achieving goals--from a needs assessment to the fundraising challenges for implementing ParentNet.
- Selection of an appropriate "home base" for ParentNet. This program was incorporated into an agency that is experienced and family friendly. Therefore, ParentNet resources can be allocated toward the provision of services rather than toward program design and administration.
- Transportation, childcare, and scholarships are made available to parents.
- The ParentNet planning team was recreated as the ParentNet Board of Directors. This group, comprised of service providers, parents, and business leaders, meets quarterly to assess progress and assist with program development, evaluation, and fundraising.

Evaluation

A ParentNet evaluation was designed to identify areas needing revision, document the efficacy of the classes, and profile parents. Since 1997, approximately 120 parents have participated in a ParentNet series annually. Typically, about 80% of these parents are Connecticut Department of Children and Family (DCF) referred. According to written evaluations and feedback from agency staff working with these parents:

- 85% of parents demonstrate improved parenting skills as reported by family caseworker; and
- 90% of the parent respondents report using improved parenting skills including, but not limited, to: less yelling and hitting, more talking, being consistent, developing and using rules and routines, having age-appropriate expectations.

As part of the evaluation process, ParentNet graduates indicate interest in ongoing parent support groups. Agency staff "volunteer" to facilitate monthly support groups addressing issues that

parents identify.

Conclusion

Cooperative Extension educators are in a prime position to provide leadership to community coalitions related to parenting education. In addition to needs assessments and program planning, educators can assist coalitions by providing ongoing training and supportive educational materials. For information about ParentNet or the Parenting People curriculum, contact Cathy Malley at 203-207-3267 or catherine.malley@uconn.edu.

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