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## Designing Professional Development Systems for Parenting Educators

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## Designing Professional Development Systems for Parenting Educators

### Abstract

As the field of parenting education grows in demand, methods of developing and supporting parenting education professionals are critical. This article describes research by North Carolina Extension staff examining the perspectives of 59 parenting educators who took part in focus group interviews addressing their professional needs. The article makes recommendations on how multiple systems can systemically work together and suggests ways Extension is uniquely situated to help prepare competent parenting educators. The article also offers a model of professional development systems interaction.

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## Background

Parent education is an essential component of Extension family life programs (Merkowitz, Jelley, Collins, & Arkin, 1997) and has been a part of Extension programming for many years. But the demand for parenting education is growing in communities and has been identified as an important national priority (Kagan, 1995). Although parenting education been a field of study and practice for decades, the professionalization of parenting education is gaining attention as questions arise such as:

- "What qualifies one to be a parent educator?"
- "What sort of background do parent educators have?"
- "Is there a pertinent degree in parenting education that I can seek when hiring?"

Parenting education is "an organized, programmatic effort to change or enhance the child-rearing knowledge and skills of a family system or a child care system (Arcus, 1993). Even with "organized programmatic efforts," however, a coherent system of family-oriented services and a broad public and institutional commitment to strengthen families is needed (Weiss, 1990). In 1996, Nick Carter's report, *See How We Grow*, provided a comprehensive overview of the complexity of parenting education. Carter suggested that parenting education needs an "infrastructure to help the field move forward."

On at least two occasions, researchers have suggested a sequence of steps critical in the development of the professional status of a field of study (East, 1980; Czaplewski & Jorgensen, 1993). These steps can be applied to the professionalization of parenting education. The steps are:

1. The activity becomes a full-time paid occupation.
2. Training schools and curricula are established.

3. Those who are trained establish a professional association.
4. A name, standards of admission, a core body of knowledge, and competencies for practice are developed.
5. Internal conflict within the group and external conflicts from other professions with similar concerns lead to a unique role definition.
6. The public served expresses some acceptance of the expertise of those practicing the occupation.
7. Certification and licensure are the legal sign that a group is sanctioned for particular service to society and that it is self-regulated.
8. A code of ethics is developed to eliminate unethical practice to protect the public.

Parenting education, as a profession, is challenged by several unique factors. First, parenting education is not a single field of study. It is embedded in many fields of study (psychology, human development, nursing, education, ministry, medicine). Second, because of the embeddedness of the literature, there is not a centrally agreed upon body of knowledge or set of competencies for parenting educators. And third, a professional preparation system does not exist that prepares parenting educators (NPEN, 2000).

There have been many discussions about the knowledge base for parenting education, but not until recently has anyone introduced a framework (DeBord, Bowers, Goddard, Kirby, Kobbe, Mulroy, Myers-Walls, & Ozretich, 2001) to edge the field towards recognized competencies. The most recent framework recognizes six content and six process areas. The content areas parallel the National Extension Parenting Education Model. They include an in-depth knowledge in the areas of:

- Guide,
- Motivate,
- Nurture,
- Understand,
- Advocate, and
- Care for self ([Smith, Cudabeck, Goddard, Myers-Walls, 1994](#)).

The process areas presented by DeBord et al., include:

- *Grow*, which pertains to one's personal professional growth;
- *Frame*, which pertains to understanding theoretical frameworks that guide the field;
- *Embrace*, which deals with understanding diversity of family, race, and ethnicity;
- *Develop*, which includes the development process for educational programs;
- *Educate*, which includes various teaching and outreach methods; and
- *Build*, which includes networking and partnering with others in the field of parenting education.

A few national organizations (National Council on Family Relations, Family Support America, and the National Parenting Education Network) have been exploring the professionalization of the field of parenting education. However, one approach has not been forwarded as the best method to build the field.

Several states lead the nation in defining parenting educator competencies and the systems that support the profession. One of these is Minnesota, which has a 75-year history of developing quality parenting educators (Palm, personal communication, 1999) and requires an advanced degree as a qualification to become a parent educator.

Texas features a system called "Texas ROPER" (Texas Registry of Parenting Education Resources). ROPER has identified core competencies and has posted a Web site with self-learning modules for parenting educators <<http://www.unt.edu/cpe/module1/pre.htm>>.

North Carolina has formed consortia of over 30 parenting education organizations and agencies, and is seeking to understand what parenting educators need in the form of a professional credential. As part of the work of the North Carolina Parenting Education Network (NCPEN), there is great interest the systems that support high-quality parenting education.

In building the field of parenting education, it is critical to recognize that there are many other systems that influence policy and changes to the profession. The term "systems" is used here to describe large infrastructures (national, state, or local) that either work with one another or separately to deliver services and programs to children and families. In working to shape the field of parenting education, the first overarching question becomes: How can multiple systems work together to prepare competent parenting educators and employ the most competent to work with parents?

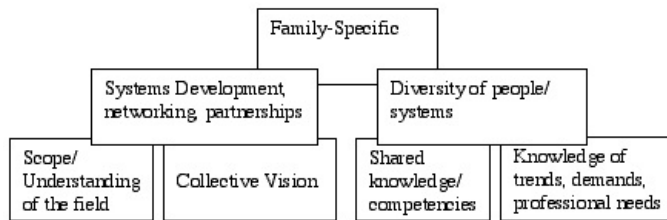
## **Defined Professional Development Systems Framework**

Identifying multiple systems that affect parenting education is the first step toward a systemic professionalization of the field and the step that was selected as a starting point when conducting the research described here. To develop a system for preparing competent parenting educators, it is important to analyze the functions of the parenting educator and the relationships among the various organizations within a system.

NCPEN identified several components that frame a system of professional parenting educator preparation (DeBord, Sloop, & Bazemore, 2001). These are depicted in Figure 1. The components include:

- A shared knowledge base of competencies for parenting educators,
- A shared understanding of the complexities and scope of the field,
- A shared vision for parenting education,
- A shared understanding of the complexities of and the current trends that affect the field,
- An infrastructure of community partners that support parenting education,
- Networking of statewide and national systems that affect the profession, and
- Meeting the specific needs of families (parents in particular).

**Figure 1.**  
Parenting Educators System for Professional Development



DeBord, K., Sloop, S., & Bazemore, S. (2001). Professional Development Systems for Parenting Education. North Carolina Partnership for Children Annual Smart Start Conference.

To further investigate professional development linkages and systems of parenting education, an exploration of the idea and concerns of parent educators in North Carolina was undertaken.

Using the framework depicted in Figure 1, it was anticipated that the shared insights of parenting educators could help refine the systems approach and provide direction for researchers and policy makers working to assure high-quality parenting education for all families. With a defined professional development systems framework, researchers and practitioners can work to move the field forward while designing systems that can meet the needs of professionals in parenting education.

## Method

Parenting educators from six locations across North Carolina were assembled into focus groups to discuss key needs for parenting educators. Using a list of volunteers from a statewide Fatherhood Conference, contacts through Head Start, and Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Educators, counties were identified based on their willingness to host a focus group within the given time frame with an emphasis on recruiting three separate rural and three urban. Identified group leaders sent invitations to other parent educators in their community networks and scheduled a comfortable site in which to gather.

In all focus groups, parenting educators were invited for the purpose of providing insight and information about the needs of parenting educators in North Carolina. A graduate student and an Extension professor conducted the focus groups with these convenient samples over a 2-month period in the fall of 2000. Each focus group lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours, with an informal discussion according to the themes suggested in Figure 1. The questions that were posed are based on Figure 1 and include dimensions of each component.

### Scope

1. How do you define parenting education? What all is involved in parenting education?
2. Describe how you see the field of parenting education.

### Collective Vision

3. If you were to dream a bit with us, what would your vision of parenting education be?
4. How could we collectively work towards this?

### Knowledge and Trends

5. What has affected parenting education over time? Now? How do you keep up with the developments and new resources?

### **Partnerships and Networking (Systems)**

6. You probably make referrals within your community. Who do you refer to? For what reasons? What other ways should we nurture partnerships to be beneficial for parents? How else do you use your networks?

### **Professional Development**

7. One suggestion to advance our field is to develop a parenting education credential for parent educators. How do you feel about this concept?

### **Community Collaboration, Diversity of Systems, People**

8. In communities, how do you figure out what parents need? How do you provide education while recognizing the many diversities in families?

### **Families**

9. What do families need? How do families need information we have? How long is/should be your association with parents?
10. What are the biggest challenges in your work? What has been most valuable to your work?

## **Results**

Across the six focus group locations, a total of 59 parenting educators participated in the voluntary groups. Every participant who attended was female. The participants were employed by various agencies, including Head Start, Cooperative Extension, child abuse organizations, Parents as Teachers, community colleges, Family Resource Centers, preschool programs, and literacy programs. Three of the locations were urban, and three of the locations were rural. Most were active parenting educators, and a few (4) were supervisors who hire parenting educators.

Their comments are summarized by the themes associated with the posed questions based on the model (Figure 1) as essential components to building a parenting education system. What emerged was an integration of the components as opposed to a hierarchy of components.

### **Scope of the Field**

Parenting educators described parents with phrases such as: "There is a stigma attached to parenting education, and parents see parenting education as something they need when they have done something wrong."

When probed about how people in the community perceive and understand parenting education, participants defined the complexity of what they do with comments such as: "There is so much to be addressed (like insurance, budgeting, child support, taking care of the home, etc.) to make families self-sufficient . . . so many related issues that it is overwhelming . . . and there are so many partners."

### **Collective Vision**

When asked to discuss a vision for parenting education, the focus turned to their immediate needs and their experiences during their daily work. This resulted in a practical vision to make the public aware more that parenting education is available, to get more community organizations involved, to recognize parenting educators, and to evaluate parenting education more effectively.

Advertising to create larger awareness about parenting education was noted repeatedly as a key tactic. Participants noted that marketing programs is made more difficult by the challenge of reaching "illiterate and Spanish-speaking families."

To encourage greater participation by parents, educators suggested that, "We need incentives for parents to enroll in and attend parenting education. Perhaps a coupon or voucher for free child care and then eventually a voucher for college tuition for their child would be a 'carrot' to offer." To collectively work towards such a vision, groups said that we need to overcome some of the obstacles parents experience now such as transportation by offering a "one-stop location with all the agencies in one place, or a mobile service van."

One group offered a vision of recognizing people in the field as parenting educators who have related degrees such as psychology, education, child development, and sociology. Coupled with this, it was their feeling that we need to recognize experience with children and families, and recognize those who are parents, "Like a mom who has successfully raised five kids may be very astute [as a parenting educator]." In working towards this vision, participants said, "We need some criteria for parenting educators that includes experience and ongoing training. Training should

include information on adult learners, learning styles, management of learning groups, group dynamics, strategies for how to teach, teaching 'tricks,' and how to use group rules."

One group of participants called for more evaluations concerning the effectiveness of parenting education. For example, they suggested that educators ask parents how often they have used the principles they learned.

When asked how parenting educators could work collectively toward the visions, participants focused on training for parent educators, especially regarding adult learning. Some indicated a need for more tools to work with different parent personalities, some wanted to learn more about group dynamics, and others wanted to know how to keep the attention of a diverse group of people. Other participants mentioned making parenting education a state policy so that more funding would be available to parenting education or for parenting education to be mandated, for example, in cases in which parents are getting divorced.

### **Knowledge and Trends**

Parenting educators said that they keep their professional knowledge current through:

- On-site conferences and teleconferences,
- Workshops,
- In-service training,
- Peer mentoring,
- Professional networking,
- Joining mailing lists,
- Searching the Internet, and
- Reading research-based materials, newspapers, and magazines.

Even with this degree of ongoing learning, parenting educators said they need more information that pertains to particular cultures of parents, such as Spanish-speaking, hearing impaired, illiterate, and those with children with special needs. Similarly, they noted the need for videotapes that were reality-based and multi-cultural, and dealt with other areas such as adolescence or ADHD.

### **Partnerships and Networking**

Participants agreed that networking within their community is critical to their work. Several parenting educators attend other meetings that link to their work; however, they noted that this degree of networking is time consuming but imperative to their work. They indicated that networking helps to:

- Obtain joint funding,
- Share much needed resources,
- Recruit parents, and
- Provide information to parents at public gatherings.

### **Professional Development**

When asked how to prepare parenting educators for this profession, participants almost always emphasized the combination of experience and education. They made positive comments regarding a parenting educator credential. One person stated the value as, "I could use a credential as a way to hire people." Another said that having a credentialing process is "one way to monitor what is going on." Another said, "There are so many credentialing systems, but I like one that focuses on parenting education."

Participants seemed interested in a parenting educator credential, hoping it would bring them professional recognition, affect their pay scale, or help them obtain benefits from their employers such as health and retirement plans. One person commented "tie this to a [salary] compensation modeling [it] after T.E.A.C.H, an educational scholarship program for child care providers that provides bonuses upon course completion." Another suggested: "There could be a testing out system for those who are already doing this." Pointing to the need to bring entities together into a total system for professional development, one person commented: "NCPEN needs to be aware of other initiatives already out there but which are disjointed."

### **Community Collaboration, Diversity of Systems and People**

Although participants described a variety of methods to determine parents' needs (parent surveys, checklists, reviewing evaluation data, monitoring progress), to be effective with parents, they emphasized that building rapport is an essential component. One focus group noted that diversity among parents can be a strength of the parenting education program. They emphasized respecting parents for who they are. One participant noted, "You can't be judgmental. There are no right or wrong parents."

### **Families**

Logistics such as transportation, time and resources, personal safety, and supporting parents in meeting their goals are among the greatest challenges parent educators identified. Moving a

parent toward his or her own goals and creating a sense of personal empowerment is difficult, particularly "when one parent wants to learn and the other doesn't, [and] when parents argue [the challenge is even greater]."

Other noted areas of parenting education included:

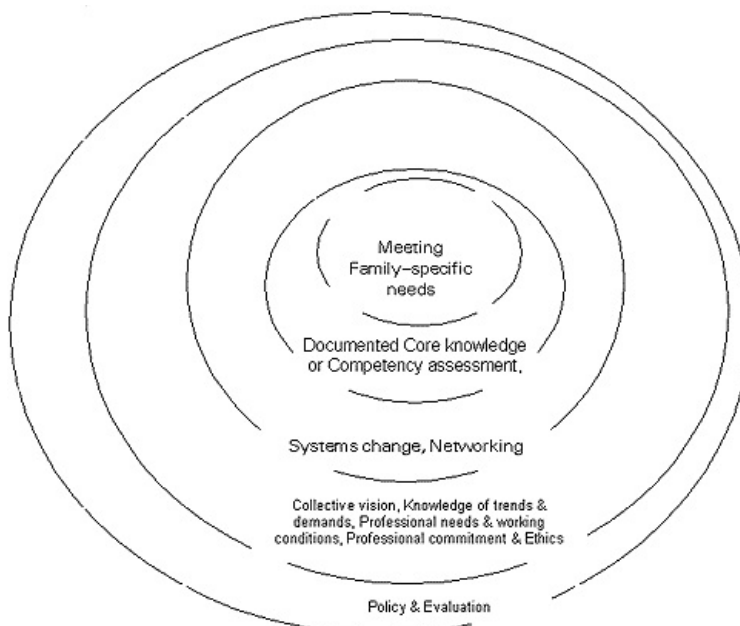
- Funding and resources,
- Evaluation and accountability,
- Policy (local, state and federal),
- Opportunity to self-assess and self-study,
- Language barriers,
- Specific needs of fathers,
- Leadership,
- Corporate partnerships,
- Community integration and team-building, and
- Desire to attend an annual professional conference for parenting educators.

## Discussion

Parenting educators involved in focus groups concentrated their comments on their daily work with parents. They rarely noted or had seriously considered the larger picture of parenting education. They were aware of some efforts being made in the area of professional development of parent educators, but perceived that they were disjointed. There was a common fervor among participants about the possibility of grounding the profession in a set of shared competencies and a networked system to assure that parents are guided by sound information and skilled trainers.

Based on their comments and their focus on family needs as their center, Figure 1 was revised. The revision depicts the interrelatedness of the systems (Figure 2). Families are supported by competent professionals and integrated systems shaped by supportive policy, a shared vision, professional ethics, and committed leaders in the profession. Figure 2 is meant to reflect a greater integration of components of the system.

**Figure 2.**  
Components in Building a Professional Parenting Education System



DeBord, K. & Matta, M. A. (2001)

Participants' answers to discussion questions correspond closely with the principles of family life education (Arcus, Schvaneveldt, & Moss, 1993). These principles emphasize meeting the needs of the family throughout the life span. They also focus on use of many professions necessary to work together to meet the needs of families. These principles further emphasize that qualified educators are crucial to the successful realization of the goals of family life education.

Empirically, there are clear implications for the field of parenting education and its development into a licensed, professional discipline. Clearly, parenting education as a professionally recognized discipline is still emerging. There are few, if any, institutions of higher education that offer degrees in parenting education. There are few resources supporting the development of a professional development credential for parenting educators.

Parenting educators contribute long hours with little pay or benefits, but steps need to be taken to assure that educators are recognized as having professional status. The first of these steps is to continue to include parenting educators in shaping the field. Doherty (2000) emphasizes a collaborative model whereby input is generated from families and communities regarding their needs in building bodies of knowledge. Subsequent steps may be to move parenting education

toward East's (1980) and Czaplewski and Jorgensen's (1993) model of professional development while getting input all along the way from practitioners as well as families.

Cooperative Extension is in a prime and unique position to advance the field of parenting education. Extension, already fully integrated in over 3500 counties throughout the nation, can use this information to locally affect parenting educational programming by ensuring that they are developing an integrated system to serve families and that attention is paid to those who serve in the parenting educator role.

Many Extension Family and Consumer Educators are beginning to form local parent educator networks to build their local infrastructures to support parents as well as the professionals delivering services. Together, those who currently work with families can build the field while monitoring those ensuring that they have qualifications to address individual needs, appropriately refer families for needed services, and teach parents using multiple outreach methods while applying research-based literature about child and family development.

One approach is to work collectively through Extension to build the infrastructure and capacity of the Extension educator workforce. Applying some of these recommendations in a system as large as extension can be the first step towards a total system across the nation. Some recommendations to consider include:

1. Explore a credentialing process for parenting educators by gathering feedback through parenting networks as a system is built. Consider a multi-level approach, with both college and non-college entry points using both educational and experiential information to guide the process.
2. Build educational programs for parenting educators that are undergirded by a common core of knowledge expanding upon the DeBord, et al. (2001) work.
3. Integrate systems by ensuring that parenting education organizations pay for or reimburse employees for the credentialing application fee and appropriately compensate educators once credentialed.
4. Professionalize the field by improving the working conditions of parenting educators, addressing such constraints as those regarding time, money, facilities, and safety issues.
5. Build a network among parent educators to ensure that educators are linked to share ideas and stay current with the developments in the field. Encourage parenting educators to develop and work towards a shared vision.
6. Design public awareness campaigns to inform communities about the value of parenting education.
7. Encourage parenting networks to collectively ensure that newly instituted policies affecting parenting education are grounded in a core knowledge base to assure quality outreach to all parents.

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