

## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT PARENT INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

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In rearing children, when is a parent not a teacher? When fathers or mothers talk to their child about the child's fears, are they not teaching? Is it not teaching when the parent models adult speech or helps the frightened child differentiate between what is real and what is imagined? Teaching is imbedded in and throughout parenting. Will not efforts that successfully improve the quality of parent-child interaction patterns also improve the role of parents as "primary educators" of their children?

Parents do not have to be taught to be teachers of their children. Parents become teachers whenever they interact with their children. The content and teaching strategy employed by parents may not, however, lead to the development of academically successful children. The purpose of intervention programs is not to make parents teachers of their children, but to influence what parents teach and how and when they teach it. This differentiation is an important consideration for program planning because it highlights the fact that intervention efforts must be designed to alter already existing patterns of parent behavior. Instead of only focusing on teaching new parenting strategies and instructional techniques, programs designed to alter existing patterns of parent behavior must be based on an appropriate theory of adult behavior and attitude change. Before it is instituted, an intervention program designed to alter parent behavior must explain how it will motivate parents to modify their behavior—to drop old parenting practices and adopt new ones.

Parent education programs need to be undertaken with caution. Since research showed that Head Start did not develop enduring educational gains in disadvantaged preschool children, what reason is there to believe that a similar compensatory education program will develop improved and enduring child-rearing skills and attitudes in low-income parents? Head Start program planners have come to recognize that environmental reinforcements are necessary to maintain Head Start gains. If the development of environments in the home and at school that reinforce the educational goals of Head Start are believed to be important to the development and maintenance of its educational objectives with children, might it not also be important to help develop the family environment and family support systems conducive to the success of a program designed to improve the child-rearing skills of low-income parents? The compensatory model of parent or child education is not likely to produce enduring changes if other personal and/or life influences and demands do not reinforce those changes. Although individuals and families find their own ways to negotiate the problems of poverty, might improved parenting be made possible if economically disadvantaged parents and families are helped to cope more effectively?

Helping agencies must realize that the dynamics of low-income families could be adversely affected by the changes that the program advocates. As a result, some low-income parents may resist making changes in child-rearing practices that they do not want or do not feel are in their best interest, even when they are encouraged to make these changes by social service and education agencies. Consequently, a more comprehensive approach to educational intervention is necessary—one in which the helping agency attempts to overcome resistance but not impose or advocate any specific kind or method of change. The process would include

providing parents with choices in a supportive environment, one in which some of the emotional needs of the parents, which were too frustrated or inadequately met in their own childhood, can find, in adulthood, cathexis to experiences that they may then choose to share with their children.

Since it is unlikely that merely providing child-rearing information and advice to parents will cause them to modify their parenting practices, what theories of adult behavior and attitude change can be used? What will motivate low-income parents to change those deleterious child-rearing practices that have become a functional part of survival in poverty, and that develop from the needs and demands of daily life?

It is apparent that welfare and social service agencies should not begin to help any low-income family if that help is didactically imposed, as opposed to being chosen or requested by a family, without first deriving an adequate understanding of the effects that specific intervention effort may have on the constellation of dynamics within a family.

A family is made up of many interdependent subsystems. Parenting behavior is one of the subsystems of family life. Changing parent behavior can have profound repercussions on other aspects of family life. Parents may resist adopting prescribed child-rearing techniques if they feel that to do so will be disruptive to some other aspect of their family life.

Each low-income parent and family will have a wide spectrum of needs which may begin, on the one hand, with food, shelter, and clothing and end with more subtle intra- or interpersonal needs. A responsibility of the helping agency is to gain an accurate picture of this spectrum for each family and to assess the interplay of these needs and the influence each has upon the rest of family life. This mandates direct observation and includes conversations with family members. As this process develops, the agency can obtain an understanding of the interplay of family dynamics and family needs. Then the agency can better help the family focus on dynamic fulcrums of change and offer options to change in these areas.

Parents frequently receive constructive child-rearing advice, but do not make it part of their teaching style. For example, a low-income parent who severely restricts and limits the young child's behavior may be told that it is important to talk to the child and encourage the child to talk. The parent may also be taught that it is important for the child to play with toys and be allowed to explore the home environment. Although the parent may understand that the child could benefit, encouraging the child to do these things at home might create more movement, noise, and stress in an already small and overcrowded family apartment. Thus, the parent, realizing that the delicate and precarious balance of family dynamics in the home might be disturbed if the parent were to adopt the prescribed teaching style, may ignore the proffered advice.

Accordingly, programs that seek to improve parent-child interaction need to help parents incorporate the new teaching strategies into their home life in such a way that other potentially responsive family dynamics are not adversely effected. It is for this reason, I believe, that the direct teaching or imposition of help is frequently rejected by the family. Consciously or unconsciously, they realize that the help will cause adverse repercussions elsewhere in the dynamics of their home life.

It might be better, therefore, when working with low-income parents (each of whom have individual personalities and individual life situations), to create an ongoing program in which the parents can choose "what" and "how" they wish to be helped. Thus, families would feel that there is nurturance and support offered upon which they can rely if they choose to change. My experience at the Cleveland Parent and Child Center suggests that when different educational

and social services are offered by a multi-disciplinary staff in a supportive environment, parents will choose the areas where they are, by their needs and motives, willing to change.

Since it may frequently be impossible to provide the kind of trained staff that have the sensitivity, experience, and knowledge of low-income family life and the training necessary to know where and when to encourage change in a parent or family, it might be best not to actively intervene. In these situations it is best to provide choices so that parents will, if and when they feel like it, actively choose from a variety of family support services. This does not mean that the staff cannot suggest alternative ways of behaving in various situations. However, staff must guard against the tendency to seek to impose upon parents specific changes in behavior that they, the staff, have deemed to be desirable.

Parents at the Center found themselves in an environment that offered choices and made suggestions, but did not try to teach or impose a specific change in their behavior. Parents could choose to become involved with the social worker, a variety of relevant home economics activities, children's activities, help the cook, etc.—all in a continuously supportive environment. Individual mothers chose to get involved in their particular way, and by that active choosing and consequent involvement, took away something for themselves that they wanted and needed. They gained a measure of satisfaction that then encouraged them to make additional program involvement choices.

Role playing can be an effective means to modify adult attitudes and behavior. The role of teacher might be played by giving parents an opportunity to plan a curriculum, choose games or toys, and make observations about their child's progress (or if in a center-based program, the progress of the other children). Role modeling can also be an effective way to develop child-rearing practices. Parents who exhibit good child-rearing and teaching practices and who are respected in their community might be used to work with parent groups or make home visits.

Opportunities for parents to meet together and talk about their child-rearing concerns are frequently very effective. At these times parents can learn from each other, share feelings, and learn about child development. It is often reassuring for a parent to learn that other parents have similar questions and concerns about their children. Parents often find reassurance from the realization that their child is no different from others at his or her stage of development.

How do you intervene to improve the child-rearing attitudes and practices of those parents who, when young children, did not receive the love and attention necessary to create emotionally adequate parents? Can their unsatisfied infant needs be met or neutralized so that cathexis to more positive child-rearing attitudes and practices can be formed? Many low-income parents did not have their dependency needs gratified when they were young infants. Inconsistent parenting or the absence of parenting during the first years of their own lives constantly threatens their ability as adults to provide a nurturing and emotionally supportive childhood to their own children. This pattern is extremely difficult to modify, even with intensive psychotherapy. Surprisingly, some improvement has been observed after these parents have let themselves enjoy the activities of childhood.

One enjoyable opportunity often not adequately satisfied in the early childhood of low-income parents is play. Play for adults can have many of the psychological qualities and need—fulfilling properties present in child's play. However, the adult is not a child. Although some low-income adults from emotionally deprived homes do gain a real measure of satisfaction from playing with children's toys and games, more adult play opportunities may also need to be provided. Play can be attractive to a parent and help meet emotional needs, thereby reducing the

competition for need satisfaction that parents experience when raising their infants and young children.

I have observed a teacher encourage a parent to play a game with her child. The child was on the floor. The parent sat next to her child. The parent began to play with the blocks, building a little house, absolutely enthralled and enjoying the experience. The child was not engaged in play by the parent at all. The two sat next to each other, engaged in parallel play.

The parent played with the blocks for several short periods of time over the next week or two. After her personal need for enjoyment was satisfied, she introduced the blocks to her child and encouraged the child to play with her. It was as if she were saying to her child, "I have gained enjoyment from playing with these blocks, and now I want to share what I have enjoyed with you." Isn't that exactly what the best parents do?

The purpose of all this is to provide enjoyment to the parent in activities that can be of developmental importance to their children. The parent then may derive enough satisfaction and personal identification with the activity to want to share it with his or her child.

Parents frequently share with their children those experiences from which they derived emotional gratification as a child and with which they developed a childhood cathexis. Many of the most important cathexes in early childhood are developed as a result of parent-child interactions. Since many deprived parents did not experience developmentally and socially appropriate emotional gratification as children, they often have difficulty providing it to their children. Coming from emotionally restrictive or punitive childhoods, they find themselves, as adults, in conflict with the emotional needs expressed by their own children. Since the parent has more power and control than the child, this conflict can lead to another cycle of childhood deprivation. This is all the more likely when, as is often the case with low-income families, severely limited resources exacerbate daily living.

Some parents have profoundly unmet personal needs. They can be timid or belligerent, loquacious, or passive, thin or fat. Often, they are suspicious and defensive. In one way or another, they either hurt inside and/or hurt those around them (most frequently their children). These parents often continuously test program staff in an attempt to plumb their strength, their endurance, and their trustworthiness.

Mrs. S. constantly and severely abused her twin two-year-old sons. They came to the Center covered with welts, bruises, and the other scars of beatings they had endured at home. This mother had great needs and desperately needed help. One would think that the Parent and Child Center would have been a sight for her sore eyes. You would never have known it by her behavior. She continually accused the staff members of doing this or that to upset or hurt her or her sons. On and on she tested the teacher, social worker, and even her community worker. She tested them to see if she dared yield her needfulness to them, or if they would prove to be as depriving, punitive, and unreliable as the society in which she lived and was reared. It took more than a year before Mrs. S. began to trust the Center staff. Slowly, after trial and testing, this severely damaged woman started to accept help—started to trust. Unfortunately, there are many other such Mr. and Mrs.

Programs designed to teach parents how to educate their children frequently have little or no success because they fail to comprehend that parent-child interaction patterns are influenced by forces that impinge on adult and family life. Inadequate housing, poor health, tensions and emotional stress, and problems with welfare often interfere with child rearing and are instrumental in fostering deleterious child-rearing conditions and practices. It is often necessary

to ameliorate or neutralize those conditions before changes can begin to take place in parenting practices.

Low-income families consistently face many problems, with limited resources to call upon. It is unlikely that efforts designed to improve a parent's teaching skills will succeed without first intervening to help the family cope more effectively with some of their most pressing problems. Experience has shown that when a serious social, economic, or personal problem affecting family life is eased, parenting practices often improve, sometimes without direct attention to child-rearing practices!

Is child rearing only the responsibility of the biological parents? Or is it the responsibility of society as a whole? The trend in federally financed programs and the current rash of books and articles with child-rearing formulas and advice seem to place the responsibility for child rearing exclusively in the hands of parents. However, rearing children is a task that all segments of a society share. Some social institutions, such as the media and public schools, are not as responsible as they should be. Funds and efforts on behalf of parenting and young children might be productively spent developing within the business, labor, religious, political, education, and communication sectors of society an awareness of their responsibility to help meet the developmental needs of parents with young children.

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