Ottawa Child & Youth Initiative: Growing Up Great

# A Summary of Promising Practices in Parenting Education & Support

A Report for the Community Collaborative Parenting Support Group

August 2013

# Contents

# INTRODUCTION

## About this Report

Recent decades have produced a growing body of literature linking various aspects of parenting support and education to improved outcomes for both parents and children.  A number of reviews have taken place to distil this body of literature (made up of practice wisdom, qualitative research and systematic reviews and evaluations), into what parenting programs and practices have been proven most effective.  The aim of this report is to synthesize this work further and to highlight specifically what is known about what works with respect to the content, audience and delivery of parenting support and education.

In the course of reviewing the available literature, two reviews emerged: 'What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of the International Evidence' (2004) and 'What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parenting Education' (2008).  Given their comprehensiveness, they will serve as foundational documents for this synthesis.  Other reviews also exist, however they were generally too focused for our purposes (i.e. on a specific type of parenting support or outcome), their inclusion criteria was too inclusive (i.e. and perhaps not scientific enough), or too exclusive (i.e. to the exclusion of less systematic or rigorous methods).  Together, the two reviews we have selected provide a broad review of some of the best, broad available evidence on effective parenting education and support.  While this report will present only the highlights of the promising practices, references are provided to numerous source documents for those who wish to have more information.

Throughout this report, a few key terms are commonly used (adapted from Moran, et al., 2004 & Mann, 2008):

> Parents: Those who provide significant care for children in home or family context, including biological parents, step-parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents and other relatives.

> Parenting Support: Any intervention for parents aimed at reducing risk and/or promoting protective factors for their children, in relation to their social, physical and emotional well-being.

> Parenting Education: Fact giving and advice to increase parent's knowledge (e.g. child development, child care, child health).  Parenting education may also be a bi-product of parenting support, and vise versa.

## A Note About Evidence on the Effectiveness

Mann (2008) and Moran, et al. (2004) both note a number of limitations and challenges associated with the available evidence on the effectiveness of parenting education and support.  First (although not unique to parenting program research) methodological design challenges, confounding variables, lack of funding for evaluation activities, absence of commonly accepted measures and the variety of programs themselves (i.e. which differ in their theoretical underpinnings, goals, target population, evaluation techniques, etc.) may limit the conclusions that can be drawn from what has been 'proven' effective.  Efforts to overcome these challenges and provide systematic rigour to their methods, such as randomized control trials (RCT), may also be fraught with challenges when applied to parenting programs.  The authors suggest that the characteristics that make certain parenting programs especially conducive to RCTs (e.g. carefully structured and controlled program) may not be the

same characteristics that make them especially conducive to parents themselves (e.g. having the flexibility to meet a variety of needs and adapt to a variety of contexts).  Given these challenges, both authors note that systematic and rigorous reviews should be balanced with other forms of evidence.  Thus, both reviews include RCT and systematic evaluation literature  as well as qualitative research (thoughts, opinions and experiences) and practice wisdom (observations and opinions of experience practitioners with years of front line work).

## A Strength-based Approach

Underlying this report is the premise that there is no one 'right' way to parent.  What works for one child may not work for another.  Rather than striving for a one-size-fits-all approach to parenting support and education, we recognize the diversity amongst (and within) families, and that each parent and child brings with him or her unique strengths. Instead of focusing on weaknesses to correct, a strength-based approach focuses on helping parents and children thrive, by "nurturing their capacity to navigate challenging situations and meet their needs in constructive ways."[i]  Implicit in nurturing capacity, is empowering parents to recognize their own valuable experience and expertise,[ii] and encouraging or facilitating opportunities for social support.  The emotional and practical support that comes from family, friends, neighbours and peers has been associated with improved coping, stress management and enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy.[iii]

## THEORIES

A parenting program's theoretical underpinnings influences its goals, assumptions about what parents want and need and the strategies adopted for implementation.[iv]  Seven (7) theories that commonly form the underpinning of parenting education and support are listed below (with descriptions abbreviated from Mann, 2006):

| | |
|---|---|
| **Child Development** | *If parents understand typical child development, they will have more realistic expectations and adjust their parenting to suit their child's developmental abilities according to their developmental stage.* |
| **Attachment** | *If parents have the skills to follow and respond to their children's physical and emotional needs, they are more likely to form secure attachments.  Secure attachments to a caregiver or nurturing adult have been shown to have a lifetime impact, promoting resiliency and enabling children to self-regulate their own needs.* |
| **Adult human development** | *Parents are unable to foster their child's healthy development until they have had their own developmental needs met.  By fostering parents' sense of self-efficacy, their ability to guide their children and advocate for them improve.* |
| **Humanistic, person-centred** | *By placing the parent with his or her prior experience, knowledge, belief and attitudes at the centre of the learning, facilitators model the style recommended for parents: a democratic, mutually respectful style of parenting, using active listening, I-messages, problems solving and negotiation.* |

| Family Systems | *Parenting issues arise in a system where all family members, including older generations and extended family, interact, along with their attendant values, beliefs, traditions and taboos. Parents bring their past relationships in their family to their current relationships with their children, and thus an understanding of the family as a system provides insight on how to best influence various parts of the whole.* |
| --- | --- |
| Social Support | *When parents have good, supportive social networks, they and their children are buffered from the effects of environmental and psychological stress. Support may include information, emotional support, instrumental support (money, in-kind services) and affirmation.* |
| Ecological | *This approach situates a child's development within ever widening contexts of family, neighbourhood, community and society and pays attention to the impact these factors have on the child (e.g. family's cultural context, wider social networks, etc.).* |

## Theories of Learning

Learning theories inform our understanding of how children and adults learn. (Descriptions abbreviated from Mann, 2006):

| Behaviour modification, operant conditioning | *Behaviour can be modified by consequences which can either reinforce or inhibit certain behaviours. By teaching parents skills, such as the use of rewards and negative consequences, children's (or parent's) behaviour can be modified.* |
| --- | --- |
| Social learning | *Adults and children learn new response patterns through observation and imitation and learning is maintained by social reinforcement.* |
| Cognitive behavioural | *By challenging parental beliefs and attributions about their children's behaviour, they will have a more realistic understanding of child development and temperament and adopt more appropriate strategies.* |
| Andragogy | *Adults learn in a different way than children. An understanding of the motivations behind adult learning and respecting adults as partners is important in the learning process.* |
| Constructivism | *Learners are active in taking in information and constructing their own personal knowledge in the context of their past experience and cultural understandings. An adult's experience is likened to a 'funnel' of previous knowledge where new information poured in the top will fall out the bottom unless it sticks to some element of what the learner already knows.* |
| Emotional context of learning | *The emotions associated with being a parent influence what parents pay attention to and what they remember. Strong emotions may interfere with clear thinking, but may also be powerful motivators for change. By recognizing the influence of emotions on* |

## Change Theory

Change Theory predicts the stages people go through before they are ready to take action to change their behavior (pre-contemplation, contemplation, determination, action, relapse, maintenance). [v] Research suggests that it is important to recognize where an individual is at on the change continuum, as readiness to learn is an important factor in whether a parent's involvement in a parenting program will be a success.[vi]

# SUMMARY OF PROMISING PRACTICES

## What content works, for whom and how

Much of what is known about what works, for whom and how is related to a number of variables such as the population you're working with, the reasons for offering the program, what your theory tells you is important, what outcomes you're trying to achieve and the age, developmental stage and needs of the child, among others. The literature is also clear that in order for a program to achieve its full potential, parents' urgent, practical needs must be satisfied first.[vii] Below is a summary of what is generally known with respect to the content, audience and delivery of parenting support and education, and the reader is directed to additional sources of information (in particular, the two 'foundational documents') should they wish more context and detail.

## *Content*

- Interventions with a strong-theory base,[viii] and who choose content, format and implementation strategies that fit with that theory and the population they are working with.[ix] In other words, interventions that subscribe to one theory tend to be better than those that do not have a strong-theory base.

- Interventions with a clearly articulated model of the predicted mechanism of change.[x]

- Interventions that have measurable, concrete objectives as well as overarching aims.[xi]

- Interventions that have manualized programs, where the core program (i.e. what is delivered) is carefully structured and controlled to maintain 'program integrity'. Structured programs increase the likelihood that the expected outcomes will be achieved. [xii]

- Short, low level, *knowledge-based interventions* are good for delivering simple, health promotions messages and factual information and advice to parents (e.g. messages about nutrition and safety).[xiii] The literature has shown positive outcomes when education is focused on concrete issues, and has been shown to have the greatest gains with marginalized populations.[xiv]/[xv]/[xvi]/[xvii]/[xviii]/[xix]/[xx]

- *Behavioural interventions* that focus on specific parenting skills and practical 'take home tips' for changing more complex parenting and child behaviours.[xxi] In particular, literature has indicated good outcomes with interventions that focus on practical skills to be used in specific situations.[xxii]/[xxiii] and those that use reinforcement.[xxiv]/[xxv]

- *'Cognitive' interventions* are good for changing beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions about parenting.[xxvi] Programs focusing on this type of content have been successful at showing good outcomes for parents, but have been less successful at showing good outcomes for children.[xxvii]/[xxviii]/[xxix]/[xxx] Given that cognitive interventions tend to incorporate verbal communication methods as a tool, there is some suggestion that this may work better with parents of older children.[xxxi]

- Interventions that work in parallel (though not necessarily at the same time) involving parents, families and children.[xxxii]

- Content for primary prevention that includes elements of child development, temperament, child-parent communication, practical parenting strategies and messages of play and having fun.[xxxiii]/[xxxiv]

## *Audience*

Parenting support and education has been shown to be effective both when tailored to a broad or universal audience as well as when tailored to specific populations.

- Universal interventions (aimed at primary prevention amongst whole communities) for parenting problems and needs at the less severe end of the spectrum of common parenting difficulties – though some types of universal services require more evaluation to determine their effectiveness.[xxxv]

- Targeted interventions (aimed at specific populations or individuals deemed to be at risk for parenting difficulties) to tackle more complex types of parenting difficulties.[xxxvi]

## *Delivery*

The implementation of parenting support and education has been discussed in the literature as being equally, if not more, important as the content when it comes to delivering parenting support and education.[xxxvii]/[xxxviii]/[xxxix]

- Early intervention: Early interventions report better and more durable outcomes for children.[xl]

- Later intervention: Late intervention is better than none at all, and may help parents deal with parenting under stress.[xli]

- Interventions that pay close attention to implementation factors for 'getting', 'keeping' and 'engaging' parents and 'sustaining' learning.[xlii]

  <u>Practical factors</u> – providing childcare, translation services, transportation, convenient time and location, welcoming environment, properly advertised and marketed, linking parents with other supports (e.g.

clothing, food bank, etc.), offering programming for children during parenting support sessions.[xliii]/[xliv]/[xlv]/[xlvi]/[xlvii]/[xlviii]/[xlix]/[l]

Relational factors – trusted staff, staff who can empathize, with strong inter-personal skills, appropriately trained, can build rapport, take an interactive and participatory approach, build on strengths, are non-threatening and have reliable up-to-date knowledge.[li]/[lii]/[liii]/[liv]/[lv]/[lvi]/[lvii]

Cultural / contextual factors – awareness of personal context (e.g. family status, mental health, poverty, housing, gender, culture, etc.), awareness and respect for different parenting styles, content for fathers, families' needs are taken care of first (mental health, employment, housing, income, social relationships, literacy, advocacy skills).[lviii]/[lix]/[lx]/[lxi]/[lxii]/[lxiii]/[lxiv]/[lxv]/[lxvi]/[lxvii]/[lxviii]

Strategic factors– follow-up reminders, addressing situational factors that may impede attendance, rewarding regular attendance, incentives.[lxix]/[lxx]/[lxxi]/[lxxii]

Structural factors (format / mode) – interactive learning, providing supporting materials, alternative methods of delivery, literacy considerations and offer a range of programs to meet diversity of needs and interests [lxxiii]/[lxxiv]/[lxxv]/[lxxvi]

- Helping parents engage and learn: Mutual goals setting, applying what they've learned, asking for feedback, set up for early successes, use methods that appeal to variety of learning styles and literacy levels, use pictures and videos and active learning methods, model, role playing, practice homework, demonstrations, instill confidence and hope, making learning personal so can apply it to their own situation.[lxxvii]/[lxxviii]/[lxxix]/[lxxx]/[lxxxi]/[lxxxii]

- Sustain Learning: providing ongoing support to maintain behaviour change, build support network and encourage links among participants, offer part 2 or booster session, newsletter, provide information about other sources of help in community.[lxxxiii]/[lxxxiv]/[lxxxv]

- Services that allow multiple referral routes for families.[lxxxvi]

- Interventions using more than one method of delivery (i.e. multi-component interventions).[lxxxvii] In one study, 71-74% of parents of young children reported using books, newspapers, magazines and television or videos to help answer questions about parenting, suggesting that parenting programs may be effectively complimented by multiple modes of delivery.[lxxxviii]

- Group work, where the issues involved are suitable to be addressed in a 'public' format, and where parents can benefit from the social aspect of working in groups of peers.[lxxxix]

- Individual work, where problems are severe, entrenched or parents are not ready or able to work in a group, often including an element of Home Visiting, as part of a multi component service, providing one-to-one, tailored support.[xc]

- Interventions delivered by appropriately trained and skilled staff, backed up by good management, support and supervision, ongoing training.[xci]/[xcii]/[xciii]

- Interventions of longer duration, with follow-up/booster sessions, of greater severity or for higher risk groups of parents.[xciv] Most proven prevention programs are intensive and delivered over a relatively long

period (but balanced with the amount of time parents have to spend on program).  Generally anything longer than 6 weeks duration begins to become a barrier.[xcv]

## ONLINE PARENTING EDUCATION & SUPPORT

The internet has become an increasingly popular resource for parents, with the number of parenting websites having increased dramatically in recent years.[xcvi]/[xcvii]  Yet, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of delivering online parenting support[xcviii]; most continue to focus on interventions involving face-to-face interactions.  In this section, we will attempt to bridge this gap and highlight what is known about delivering parenting education and support online.

Social media has changed the way we communicate with one another.  In fact, many families are more likely to consult television, books and the internet, rather than their friends or neighbours, for parenting advice.[xcix]  One study reported that 71% of mothers indicated that the internet was an important source of parenting information (compared to their mother 69%, other mothers 51%, childminder 31% and neighbours 15%).[c]  Another study found the internet to be a common source of information for parents (76%) while parenting workshops were a less common source of information (29%).[ci]  Digital tools have made it possible to reach more people, more quickly and more often, and in a way that possibly overcomes barriers traditionally associated with in-person parenting programs.  Additionally, online programs provide a convenience of 24/7 access, anytime, anywhere.[cii]  Frequent use of online parenting support websites has also been associated with high levels of self-esteem and development of socials support networks.[ciii]

### What content works, for whom and how:

### *Content*

- Online programs that have a peer support component.[civ]

- General information and support.[cv]

- Online public health information and key messages.[cvi]

- Topics geared specifically towards fathers and information that is tailored to take into account the unique role and perspective of fathers (e.g. father-infant interaction versus breastfeeding).[cvii]/[cviii]

- Content designed to provide knowledge and support to parents.[cix]  Online support has been shown to translate into feelings of parental empowerment.[cx]

### *Audience*

- One study found the most frequent users of online parenting support were those with lower educational and income levels, single parents and young parents,[cxi]/[cxii] suggesting that internet-based programs have potential to reach potentially vulnerable parents.  Similarly, another study found that parents who are

mothers, young parents (less than 40 years of age) and unmarried tend to use the internet for parenting support and information more often.  However, they found that higher levels of education were associated with greater use of online education and support.[cxiii]

- Mothers accessed and used online parenting support more frequently than fathers,[cxiv]/[cxv] although some studies suggest that online information and delivery may be well suited to fathers.[cxvi]/[cxvii]

## *Delivery*

- Mass media campaigns have been shown to increase awareness and recall of public health messages (but could not cause significant behaviour change in subjects).[cxviii]

- Electronic parenting information (provided through email or internet), tailored to the father's role and particular perspectives and circumstances shown to change father's approaches to parenting[cxix]

- Effective online communities are ones that have a clean, well-lit place, rules of play, an element of self-selection, offline connectivity, intentionality and community management[cxx]

- Online forums that allow conversations to be held between participants has been suggested to be a way to increase knowledge, receive non-judgmental support, develop opinions on parenting practices and develop social support networks.[cxxi]

## AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

For the purposes of this summary report, our interest was in parenting education and support literature that had relatively 'mainstream' relevance, aimed at parents dealing with common problems (rather than the rarer, more serious types of problems that would fall into the 'clinical' range).  Both Mann (2008) and Moran, et al. (2004) note a number of gaps in our understanding of what works, and areas where future research could provide some answers:

- We know far less about the medium and long-term outcomes of children from parent training programs, than we do about short term impact

- Substantial focus on interventions that prevent or reduce known risk factors for poor outcomes for young people, but not a correspondingly large literature on services that address themselves to building protective factors

- Most interventions serve women, and most evaluation samples contain insufficient numbers of men to be able to draw definitive conclusions about what works for fathers and whether this is different from what works for mothers

- Little information about cost effectiveness

- Unclear about the optimal level of intensity and duration to achieve desired outcomes

- To what extent programs need to be adapted culturally or to meet the needs of higher risk families

- Benefits of group-based versus one-on-one work

- Optimal styles and modes of delivery

- Effectiveness of offering programs to parents and children

- We know less about impact of some types of open access or universal services than we do about those that target a specific type of user (harder to monitor and evaluate)

- Children's views about the impact of parenting changes

- Little is known about parent's use of the internet to gain parenting information, and what elements of online education and support are most effective

## CONCLUSION

This summary report was intended to inform readers of the current literature on promising practices around parenting education and support. The report has a strength based focus and takes into account the diversity of families and parenting approaches.

A key message that this summary report introduces is the importance of social supports. Many of the theories underpinning parenting programs mention the significance of family and friends. Ideally, parent support and education classes should offer caregivers more than just practical skills; these classes should provide parents with an environment that is conducive to learning, growing and socializing. Social support networks offer parents a model from which to learn from, a source of knowledge and strength and a buffer against environmental and psychological stress.

A unique addition to this report is the summary of promising practices pertaining to online parenting education. Online parenting education and support is an area of research that needs to be expanded as technology becomes of greater importance in our every day lives.

While future research is needed in order to provide an exhaustive list of promising practices around all mediums of parenting programs, this report provides a fairly comprehensive summary of existing literature on this topic.

# FOUNDATIONAL REVIEWS:

| What Works in Parenting Support?  A Review of the International Evidence (2004) | What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parenting Education (2008) |
|---|---|
| Commissioners and Authors: | |
| Carried out by the independent Policy Research Bureau (PRB), on behalf of the Family Policy Unit of the Home Office (DfES), UK<br><br>Authors: Patricia Moran, Deborah Ghate and Amelia van der Merwe | Commissioned by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP), Canada<br><br>Researcher/writer: Betsy Mann<br><br>Editor: Janice MacAulay |
| Aim & Audience | |
| To review growing body of international (published and unpublished) literature that documents the scientific evaluation of parent support programs and to delineate what is known about 'what works', 'does not work', is 'promising', or 'unknown'.  The report aims to distil key messages for policy makers and service planners, regarding practice, research and overarching national (UK) policy. | Aim was to identify strong evidence for promising practices that contribute to effective programs for parents of young children, particularly parents facing multiple challenges.  Review includes both published sources and key informant interviews |
| Focus & Scope | |
| Parenting Support is the focus.  Includes both interventions that affect outcomes for children from birth to early adulthood, as well as outcomes for parents. Evidence was drawn from international evaluation literature and included both quantitative and qualitative evaluations in order to provide a picture of effectiveness in terms of significant outcomes and in relation to program implementation and delivery. Their review of evaluation literature included universal services and targeted services, and interventions aimed at primary and secondary levels of prevention but rarely included those at the tertiary levels of prevention and treatment. Interventions had to involve parents or parents with their children from birth to 19 years.  Both qualitative and quantitative evaluations were included, but had to be deemed 'of sufficient methodological robustness' to be included. The report also highlights areas for future research. | Parenting Education is the focus. Coming from a family support perspective, the report aims to focus on implementation variables that make the most difference in how parents receive a program, as opposed to how designers write it.  Focus was on parenting programs designed for delivery to groups of parents (primary, secondary and tertiary interventions).  Focus on parents 'at risk' – facing multiple challenges. |

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# ENDNOTES

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[ii] Moran, et al. (2004)

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Cartner, (1996)

[v] Prochaska, et al. (2002)

[vi] Knowles, M. et al. (1998)

[vii] Mann, (2006)

[viii] Moran, et al. (2004)

[ix] Mann, (2006)

[x] Moran, et al. (2004)

[xi] Ibid.

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# ALTERNATE TABLE SHOWING MODELS OF PARENTING:

*Source: Goddard, et al. (2004)*

| Typical Responses to a Parenting Dilemma and Definition of Successful Discipline for Different Schools of Parenting |
| --- |

| Model of Parenting | Response to Child Who Has Not Cleaned Room | Parents Have Succeeded at Discpline When |
|---|---|---|
| **Alderian** | Say something like, "You may play with your toys as soon as you clean up your room." | They can communicate democratically with their children, and the children take responsibility for their behaviour. |
| **Developmental** | Examine what you are asking the child to do and think about whether the expectations are appropriate for a child of that age. | They have provided activities and environments that meet the child's developmental needs, and the child reaches his or her developmental potential |
| **Behavioral** | Tell the child to clean the room. Repeat the statement as necessary and start applying increasingly strong consequences, like taking away privileges. | Their children follow rules and do the things their parents think they should do. |
| **Humanistic** | State clearly that you are unhappy that the room has toys and clothing spread across the floor and furniture. Encourage the child to think of a good solution. | Their children feel free to express their feelings, feel good about themselves and behave responsibly. |
| **Socially conscious** | Point out how dirty room affects others in the home, if it does. Offer to help clean the room and ask the child to help with one of your chores. | Their children show empathy and respect for themselves and others, show understanding of the effect of their behaviour for others, and feel empowered to change situations they feel are unjust. |