

What Works in Parenting Programs for Parents of Young Children Living with Multiple Stressors

Getting Participants to Keep Coming

Even if a program is well designed, with good, evidence-based content, it can still fail to show positive results because of the way it has been implemented. To make a worthwhile program truly effective, you need to pay attention to process variables, like recruitment, retention, engagement, maintenance and ongoing support, as well as to the content of the program you offer.

After getting participants to sign up for a program, the next step is to keep them coming. This is a particular challenge when working with parents of young children living in situations where they face multiple stressors. A number of studies mention a significant **drop-out rate** from parenting programs; up to 40% is not uncommon.

There are several practical reasons that parents may leave a program: they lacked time, their work schedules changed, their children got ill, they moved unexpectedly, they were under too much stress, etc. Even when parents complete the program, all these factors can contribute to poor attendance. It is also possible, of course, that parents decided they didn't like the facilitator, the other members of the group, the content of the program or the methods being used. If a program's methods remind participants of unhappy experiences of failure in school, the resulting discomfort may lead them to drop out. In addition, the process of learning itself may make participants anxious, just because it requires them to give up old habits and try out unfamiliar behaviours. A number of factors will influence whether the unfamiliar will be seen as risk or opportunity for growth, including the participants' personal characteristics, their prior experience, and the facilitator's ability to frame the new material positively. If participants think the new information or perspective is too risky, they may not return to the program.

Here are some suggestions from the literature about **ways to maintain the attendance** of parents of young children living in situations where they face multiple stressors:¹

- Continue to **offer incentives** and **reduce barriers** with practical assistance. It is false economy to try to save money by cutting funding for the kind of assistance that maintains participation. Lack of child care or money for transportation may be enough to keep participants from attending a program, especially for those who don't immediately see how a program will help them and whose low sense of self-efficacy makes them think that they can't do anything about their situation anyway.
- Be **persistent**. Follow-up phone calls and reminders can bring non-attenders back to the program, perhaps because they give you a chance to make one-to-one contact.
- Create a **relaxed, welcoming atmosphere**. Informality and a "homey" atmosphere will increase participants' comfort. They should feel that they belong in this place.

"I believe the social component is what draws them out more than the opportunity to learn something; however, once you get them out they are usually pleased (sometimes surprised) by what they have learned."

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

¹This is the second in a series of five documents which summarize practices that have proven most effective when working with parents of young children living in circumstances with multiple challenges. Complete references for all the suggestions here are provided in the document *What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parent Education* by Betsy Mann, published by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada). To view *What Works for Whom?*, as well as the other four summaries, go to www.frp.ca.

- Adopt a **non-judgmental attitude**. People don't stay in situations where they think others judge them as inadequate or as lacking some essential qualities. Parents who live in disadvantaged circumstances often feel this way in their relations with formal systems and service providers.
- **Build on strengths**. It is essential that parents feel that you acknowledge their experience and expertise. By recognizing participants' strengths, you lay the foundation for building resilience and optimism in the face of difficult circumstances.
- Increase **feelings of self-efficacy**. Self-efficacy is the feeling that one's actions have an influence on what happens. Low self-efficacy may make people feel there's no point in attending a learning activity. You can help people experience the positive effect of their actions by encouraging reciprocity in giving and receiving help in the context of your program. For instance, participants can contribute by bringing a children's book to share, demonstrating a craft to others or donating used clothes to an exchange. When they have opportunities to offer support to others, participants increase their feelings of self-efficacy and competence. They also build feelings of belonging that start to break down social isolation.
- Use **mutual goal setting**. Involving participants in setting goals for the program is a particularly potent way of building the feelings of self-efficacy and of ownership of the program that will motivate them to keep attending.
- Link participants to other services that can **satisfy their urgent practical needs**. It is hard for parents to commit to participation in a parenting program if they are preoccupied with how to put groceries on the table.
- Foster a relationship of **mutual trust and respect** between you and the participants. All learning takes place in the context of personal relationships. Participants are more likely to keep attending if they feel they have a good relationship with you. Given the negative contact many parents living in disadvantaged circumstances have had with service providers, building a good rapport is essential to a successful program. In particular, you will need to explicitly address issues of confidentiality.

"I'm amazed at parents' willingness to go 'above and beyond' to help another parent in need when they themselves are struggling."

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

"Developing a trusting relationship with me often allows the parent to go on to develop another positive relationship with another professional, in particular with high-risk populations who have had negative experiences with other professionals."

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- Be **flexible and adapt topics and material** to participants. Parents need to feel they're learning something relevant and worthwhile to them. Many facilitators, particularly those working with parents with lower education and literacy skills, have found that the structure and/or content of some manualized programs does not resonate closely enough with participants' needs and interests. They report feeling that if they did not adapt the program, parents would drop out. Even if you are offering a structured program, you should expect to spend time planning your sessions to suit the participants in your group.
- Be responsive to **cultural issues** surrounding parenting. Sensitivity to cultural issues goes a long way to building trust and confidence.
- Build a **feeling of belonging**. Social support from other members of the group can help relieve stress and maintain motivation for learning new parenting approaches. Bonds of friendship can keep participants coming back.

Parents often comment that our Family Place and its programs are a safe place that they can come to. 'You create a feeling of family for us' is a comment that we often hear."

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

