

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

Helping Participants to Use What They Learn

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.

Moving knowledge and insights from the group setting into use in parents' homes must be a goal of any prevention program. Talk is not enough; for children's lives to be improved, parents have to put ideas into practice. Skilled facilitators use techniques that help parents do that.

Here are some suggestions on how to make it easy to move learning from meeting room to kitchen for parents of young children living in situations where they face multiple stressors:¹

- Engage learning on the level of **attitudes and values**. There is an emotional component to learning new health-related behaviours. Participants' attitudes, beliefs and values cannot be ignored. You can engage emotions by using interactive techniques, especially role-playing and demonstrations. One of the most emotionally powerful techniques uses videotaping of the participant with his or her child, followed by feedback that focuses on strengths and successes.
- Make learning **personal**. When you give many concrete examples of how new ideas can be applied in the home, participants will find it easier to transform acquired knowledge into something that is personally meaningful and useful in their own situation. The personal stories of other group members will be most powerful in making this transformation real.
- In your interactions with participants, **model the skills** they can use with their children. When you use active listening, empathy, problem-solving techniques, etc. in the group process, you are showing parents effective ways they can interact with their children.
- Instil **confidence and hope**. If parents start from a position of low self-esteem and low self-efficacy, the fact that the facilitator believes in their abilities can go a long way to helping them succeed. In fact, research suggests that you can have an enormous impact on the success of early intervention by supporting parents' feeling that they are developing as confident and competent caregivers. This confidence is important because studies indicate that a low sense of self-efficacy in parenting is associated with inconsistent parenting styles, and consequently poor child outcomes. You can use a strengths-based approach by recalling participants' past successes when meeting challenges and by breaking down new ways of doing things into small steps that seem more possible. You can also encourage participants to decide on their own priorities and support them to imagine solutions.

“People realize they know a lot more than they thought and develop confidence in dealing with their children and that can carry over as the child enters the school system. People realize they are not alone in what and how they think about parenting and that everybody feels a bit crazy at times.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

¹This is the fourth 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.

- Use **active learning** techniques. Learning comes alive when it is active. You can illustrate concepts using live or video demonstrations, as well as scripted and unscripted role plays. Several programs have found that videotaped vignettes are very effective in helping participants imagine how they can actually use new strategies, especially when viewing is followed by discussion of the skills that were modelled.

“Many parents have not been parented well themselves and need to experience ‘play’ and need to see how to interact with their children in a positive manner. This often helps parents learn to reduce their stress with their children.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- Provide **practice opportunities**. Practice is the key to moving learning into daily life and reinforcing new habits. You can provide practice opportunities either by setting up role plays among adult participants or by organizing actual practice time with children. In particular, when parents have not had much experience relating to infants, it is important for the baby to be present during the program. This will allow participants to practise new skills, such as responding to an infant’s cues, on the spot, rather than later at home. Several programs videotape the parent and child interacting and then provide feedback and coaching.

“[I’ve seen the effects of] positive interactions that have been modeled like singing and touching their child. The moms were not doing those things when they first came to us but watched us do them with their children over and over and now most of this young group of moms is now doing this. They used to think I was nuts until they saw the response of their child.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- Set up a related **program for children** as part of the child care setting. If children and parents gather together after the end of the adult part of the program, “teachable moments” may arise when staff can model new material in context. Such multi-component programs allow for synergy between formal and informal methods of learning.
- Ask participants to **choose something they would like to apply** at home. Assigned “homework” is part of many parenting programs, and clearly this incites parents to put into practice the concepts they have discussed. However, for a variety of reasons, parents under stress often find it difficult to complete practice assignments outside the session. Family-centred participatory practices would suggest that you will get better results if you ask participants to choose for themselves what they wish to try out in their family. They are more likely to do what they have themselves chosen and committed to. Whether practice exercises are assigned or chosen, the results are normally discussed at the next group meeting.

“One participant indicated that reading over and over again a ‘homework’ article about nurturing self helped her to get through a very difficult time where she would otherwise have been very hard on herself. Participants requested more chapters from that book!”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

