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Parenting Education

Practitioners Talk

Ideas and Information for Parenting Practitioners

Capacity Building as a Parenting Education Tool

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Capacity building, defined as “an ongoing process of providing, creating or mobilizing experiences through which children, parents, families, and communities enhance their ability to identify and meet development enhancing opportunities or challenges in a sustainable way,” is a valuable tool for parent educators.

It is important for us to provide information and promote skills. It is also important to do so in ways that result in new knowledge, skills or attributes that will influence decision-making, strategies, and parenting confidence. This increases the likelihood that parents will be able to use parenting information independently and in new situations. Capacity building is based on the philosophy of recognizing the talents and abilities of individuals, families and groups and having the ability to promote and build upon these abilities.

We use capacity building in a free parenting education and support program, the Parenting Club, a group of 10 parents and caregivers (such as grandparents and foster parents) who meet weekly for two hours for six to eight weeks. A project of the Family, Infant and Preschool Program (FIPP), it is being implemented in two rural communities in western North Carolina. Funded by the North Carolina Children's Defense Fund, the club offers parenting discussions facilitated by staff members while child activity specialists offer children's activities. After the adult discussion, parents and children come together for parent-child activities.

Participants represent diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Both communities are predominantly white with a many families living in poverty. The largest minority group is Latino, with a growing population of Hmong from Laos. Most participants have at least two children younger than 5; however, one group was almost entirely parents of teenagers. Some are referred through the state [?]

Department of Social Services (DSS), local schools, and the local Domestic Violence Resource Center. Others were attracted by the Parenting Club flyers, newsletter announcements, and word of mouth [HOW word of mouth?]. Although participation in this program is voluntary, some groups were comprised entirely of families required by DSS to attend some kind of parenting class; other groups were almost self-referred. The most successful groups [is success measured in terms of retention? amount of interaction?] included participants from a variety of referral sources and with a variety of life experience.

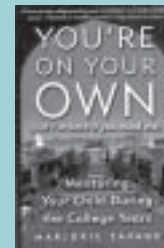
The Parenting Club does not use a preset curriculum, but provides information and activities based on individual parent or group-identified desires or outcomes for their participation. To ensure that the program stays interest-based, facilitators use the ongoing feedback from participants (both volunteered and solicited) to determine what information about child development, behaviors, and similar issues to offer in future parenting discussions.

Parent Participation Important

All practices used in the Parenting Club focus on promoting the active participation of the parents—which, research shows, is one key to capacity building. It is logical that the more actively parents participate in meeting their own desires the more likely they are to take initiative and to follow through. When parents are initiating and implementing a plan they orchestrated (with support), they are more likely to attribute their successes to their own thinking and their own hard work. This self-attribution is remarkably motivating, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of confidence-feeding competence. Research shows that capacity is

Issue 23 ▲ Winter 2004

Book Review



CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

built when parents who have sought help take responsibility for and are engaged in the activities toward accomplishing their desired outcomes (Bandura, 1986).

During the Parenting Club, participants share stories, listen to one another, reflect on their experiences, develop plans for new parenting strategies, and engage in group activities designed to strengthen parenting knowledge and understanding. As participants actively use their knowledge and abilities, it becomes more likely that they will continue to help one another and generate parenting strategies based on their priorities even when the facilitators are not present. They are able to internalize the process of building their skills, which enables them to engage in building their capacity anytime, anywhere.

Importance of Reflection

Reflection allows an individual or group to reach a deeper understanding about how they gained knowledge and skills. It helps people attribute their change, learning, and growth to themselves and examine what they need to do differently the next time they have a challenge.

At Parenting Club, reflection is woven into every session. Facilitators help parents learn to ask key questions to evaluate experiences, results, and strategies and thus better respond to future challenges. The process focuses on examining actions in light of intentions, and using this information. Reflections always lead to new action plans: to try a new strategy, modify an existing behavior, or to continue what is successful.

During Club sessions, facilitators offer reflective questions designed to encourage parents to consider their actions and make realizations that help parents plan what to do next. For example, rather than even suggesting solutions when parents ask about such problems as tantrums, facilitators ask why parents think children are behaving that way or if parents have noticed if there are certain times when the children throw tantrums.

Facilitators follow with questions about what has worked in the past and how parents make better behavior happen. Parents are guided through a process where they gain a greater understanding of the factors that may be contributing to the child's tantrums and to the parents' successes and, thus the parents can generate a wider pool of potential solutions.

Staying Focused on Parents

As part of the evaluation of the Parenting Club, we developed a questionnaire to see whether our practices are consistent with the capacity-building model and practices. Most parents reported that the Parenting Club activities "almost always" or "always" are based on parent interests and priorities. Examples of parents' comments:

"...the facilitators encouraged us to focus on things that happened to us through the week and . . . let us talk about what was bothering us or what was making us feel good."

"Whatever we want to bring up is definitely acceptable. If it is not pertinent to what is going on they have a little holding bin. They will write down something and get to it later because they know that it will be relevant."

Parents reported that reflection was "almost always" or "always" a part of their participation in the Parenting Club activities. Comments include:

"Almost always, there was something that you would hear or think about that you can take home and apply and I think you notice more, you're more observant. We would talk about it and say, 'Yeah, I did good' or 'Give me some more ideas.'"

Additionally, we asked parents if the Parenting Club provided what they came for and we examined their responses to see if participants built their capacity (i.e., enhanced or gained knowledge, skills or attributes) as a result of the activities. Here are examples of what parents said:

"To me misbehavior was just not doing what you were supposed to do . . . but [the facilitator] talks about what makes them misbehave . . . whether it was a power struggle, maybe they were hungry or sleepy or sick. . ."

"It made me realize that he was trying to communicate with me . . ."

"I never realized how important all the little decisions are that I make as a parent. There are no simple things. It all means something to my child."

"She always wants to look for beetles. I was more understanding and let her be curious. That was one of the ways they helped me, by showing me that I was rushing her some times and some times I needed to calm and let her explore."

"I learned to say something other than, 'No.'"

"I thought I was letting my daughter get away with things but in reality I was just being an understanding parent."

"I can see a change in my entire family because I have started saying more positives to

them."

"When I first found out I had to come here I thought I was a bad parent, but that's really not true at all. Everyone can benefit from talking about how they parent and share their ideas. I'm just as much of an expert as everybody else and I have helped people the same as they have helped me."

How Is as Important as What

Some of the parents referred to the Parenting Club were apprehensive about attending a parenting education program. Most, however, were pleasantly surprised. They found themselves part of a supportive group of parents and caregivers, they found activities developed in response to the interests and concerns they articulated, and they received both information and support from the facilitators.

We believe the Parenting Club has been successful because it is based on an evidence-based capacity-building model. We encourage other parenting educators to follow this model, to recognize that how parenting information is presented is as important as the information itself. To sum it up in the words of an old Chinese proverb, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime"

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