

Family Living Programs

The Parenting Newsletter Project: What Parents Need to Know

Situation

Many of the social ills that trouble us today—from poor school performance to juvenile violence—originate in the way parents have raised their children. Yet, parents who most need parenting education are the least likely to come to a class.

Response

University of Wisconsin-Extension has produced a very inexpensive parenting education program that is surprisingly effective. It has been delivered to nearly half of all Wisconsin families giving birth for over a decade. UW-Extension produces and distributes three series of instructional newsletters for parents – *Preparing to Parent*, *Parenting the First Year* and *Parenting the Second and Third Years*.

These newsletter series are age-paced. This means, for example, that parents of a 24-month-old toddler receive information on the physical, intellectual and social skills being developed by children this exact age. Parents also learn about promoting optimal child development, through guidance and discipline ideas and language learning activities. Because the newsletters are written at the fifth grade reading level, 91percent of U.S. adults can read them - in either English or Spanish.

Parents receive the newsletters free, usually in the mail. *Parenting the First Year* is received monthly for the first 12 months of the child's life. *Parenting the Second and Third Years* is available bi-monthly during the child's second and third year. This is especially significant because the materials reach parents who most need parenting education but are also the least likely to come to a class. UW-Extension offices in 65 counties coordinate distribution of the newsletters with community partners. Partners include more than 140 Kiwanis Clubs, 85 hospitals and health departments, and dozens of other businesses and service clubs.

Outcomes

This intervention has produced some important outcomes for Wisconsin families and is making a significant difference in the state's future. Research shows that parents change both their beliefs and actions in raising their children.

- Parents rate the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter series "very useful" as a source of child rearing advice more often than any other source.
- Parents who receive *Parenting the First Year*, compared to those who don't, have beliefs significantly less like those of child abusing parents.
- Parents who receive *Parenting the First Year* report spanking or slapping their babies significantly less often than comparable parents who did not receive the newsletters.
- Approximately 35,000 families, nearly half of all new parents in Wisconsin, received *Parenting the First Year* newsletters last year. An additional 22,000 Wisconsin families received *Parenting the Second and Third Years* last year.

- Parents in socioeconomic risk categories (for example, low income, low education, single, teen, or isolated parents) were significantly more likely than others to report that, "reading the newsletters caused me to slap or spank my child less often."
- Approximately 520,000 families have received *Parenting the First Year* since the project began 18 years ago. This means that, approximately 1 in every 12 Wisconsin residents, and half of Wisconsin children, have been raised by a parent who received this parenting education.
- Between 55 and 60 people read the newsletters each day online (about 21,000 per year). Fifteen other states and two other countries use the newsletters (Canada, England and soon Korea).
- A pilot study in Britain of the "English" language version of *Parenting the First Year* ("Baby Express") found that teenage mothers reported changing their parenting behaviors in positive ways as a result of reading the newsletters. For example, mothers felt more comfortable responding quickly to their baby's cries (less afraid of spoiling baby).
- In Britain, mothers who received "Baby Express" newsletters for one year, as compared to those who did not, significantly increased their feelings of well-being, reduced both the frequency and intensity of reported "daily hassles," and had more appropriate expectations of their infant's behavior.
- UW-Extension's partners raise approximately \$215,000 a year for printing and postage. Last year, approximately 770 volunteers from partner organizations donated more than 5,200 hours to coordinate the mailings. Partners include Kiwanis Clubs, hospitals and health departments, businesses and service clubs.

The newsletters also help parents of toddlers with suggestions for child guidance and discipline. Parents learn how to make their homes safer, how to stimulate language development at this key age, and how to get their young children started on chores. Parents have been pleasantly surprised to learn that their toddlers really can help out, in their small ways. Helping with chores sets up an expectation that will be helpful in the future and research shows that children who are expected to help out with chores do better later, in school and in life.

Responses from parents include:

- "I enjoyed reading the newsletters because I was a very inexperienced first-time parent and I had no good solid advice to go by. I even found them helpful for my second child, because they reminded me of some things I had forgotten." (Wood County parent)
- "Everything I learned about safety came from the letter." (Oconto County parent)
- "Even though he might make more of a mess, he feels useful and I can see the pride in his eyes when I praise him on a good job cleaning." (Racine County parent)
- "They like to help with everything even if we're not doing the exact same thing...I always thought kids were too young and thought they should wait. Boy, was I wrong!" (Portage County parent)

Additions to the project:

- *Parenting Future Readers* is a set of 12, age-paced literacy guides to accompany the parenting newsletters or be used independently as teaching tools. They provide parents with useful advice on how to positively influence their infant and toddler's language and literacy development. A Spanish version is also available.
- *Parenting Your Unique Child* is a set of 12, age-paced temperament guides to accompany the parenting newsletters or be used independently as teaching tools. They provide parents with information about child temperament and advice on parenting children with different temperament styles.
- *Preparing to Parent* is a new series for expectant mothers and fathers. This series includes three issues for early, mid and late pregnancy, and one issue on preparing for birth and after. A Spanish language version is in preparation.

The Parenting Newsletters can be found online at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/parenting>. They can be ordered from Cooperative Extension Publications by calling (877) 947-7827; or online at <http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/>. As the new publications become available, they will also be located on these web sites.

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