Parents as Teachers Supports Idaho Families of Young Children

The Situation
Interest in parent education has grown in Idaho communities in recent years as families seek new ways to meet the needs of their children in today’s world of working mothers, single and divorced parents, and new temptations for children and youth. At the same time, concerns about achievement for Idaho children drew attention to the early years as a prime time for laying the foundation for later school success. Recent decades of research show the years from birth through five to be active periods of learning and brain development for young children.

Inspired by these findings, Idaho’s Governor Dirk Kempthorne sought to bring a program to Idaho called Parents as Teachers, a national research-based parent education curriculum designed to help children’s first teachers, their parents, best support their children’s learning in those important early years. To attain this end, the Governor needed a “home” for the program that could bring Parents as Teachers to families in Idaho communities throughout the state, while providing the research resources necessary to evaluate the success of the program.

Our Response
The University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System was in a unique position to meet these needs. Family and Consumer Science county educators have the training and experience to launch the program in their counties. Thirteen counties in Idaho are host to these Parents as Teachers sites, with county educators developing advisory committees, hiring and supervising parent educators and overseeing the data-collection facet of the program. At the state level, Harriet Shaklee and Diane Demarest brought skills in program development, research, and evaluation to develop policies as needed, devise an evaluation scheme with relevant data indicators, coordinate data collection, and analyze the data.

After 18 months of program delivery, the University of Idaho Parents as Teachers Demonstration Project is serving 311 families with 458 children. Program participation is entirely voluntary and is free to the families. Trained parent educators conduct personal visits with the families once a month, and hold parent group meetings once a month. One bilingual educator serves Spanish-speaking families. Six programs are assisted by AmeriCorps volunteers from the community.

Parents have shown a strong commitment to Parents as Teachers since its inception. After 18 months of program delivery, 89% of the families remain with the program. Program participants represent the full spectrum of Idaho families, including those at all levels of income and education, single parent and two-parent families, teen parents and grandparents.
as parents, one-child and large families. After one year in the program, 95% of parents report high satisfaction with the personal visits that form the core of the program.

**Program Outcomes**

All children in the program are screened for health, vision, hearing and developmental progress. Early identification allows families to address problems early, so children can take full advantage of the learning opportunities ahead. In 2001, parent educators identified 6 vision concerns, 7 hearing problems, 8 health concerns, and 22 developmental delays among Parents as Teachers children. When a concern is identified, parents are given a referral to an appropriate professional. Health screenings show 91.5% of children 19-35 months of age in the program are fully immunized, well above the state average of 74.6% for children of comparable age.

After one year in the program, parents report that the Parents as Teachers program has been influential in their lives. Parents completed a questionnaire on their current state of understanding and ability in working with their children compared to their level before they entered the program. Parent responses showed that they have gained knowledge of basic child development, including new research information on children’s brain development. They also said they had more confidence in themselves as parents and in their ability to help their child learn. In addition, they felt stronger in parenting skills, including their ability to identify their child’s needs, and to respond when he or she is upset. Gains reported by parents were sizeable as well as being statistically significant, with mean increases ranging from one to two steps on a 6-step scale.

The goal of the Parents as Teachers curriculum is to help parents best support their children’s learning as they interact with their children. Program effects on behavior are shown in parents’ reports that they read more to their children and do more activities with them after one year in the program. Research shows that reading and parent-child activity are two critical components to promoting children’s learning at home. Parents also say that they have stronger connections to other families with children after their program year, another way in which the program builds family strength.

Data from the program show that parents find the information from the program to be useful in their family lives. Parent educators ask at each month’s visit if families have followed up on any of the information or activities from the last visit over the intervening month. Parent follow-up takes various forms, such as singing the song they learned, trying the activity from the lesson, sharing the information with their child’s other parent or with grandparents, or connecting with a community resource mentioned in the visit, among other responses. Among parents who had been in the program for a year, 82% report that they followed up on more than half of the visits, with 54% following up more than three-quarters of the time.

Children benefit from the program as their parents gain new knowledge and put their new skills into practice at home. As parents learn more about children’s development and how they learn, they are able to develop home environments that effectively support their children’s learning processes. They are also better equipped to anticipate the changes ahead for their children as they grow and learn. Parents report that it’s more fun to be a parent, when they feel so much better prepared.

**For More Information**

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