Parent Education Impacts Northern Idaho

The Situation
Parenting is a demanding task that challenges even the best parents. When it is apparent that children's needs are not being met or there are signs that children are being abused, the legal system must interfere in families' processes. For these parents, classes that provide information about effective parenting strategies may make it possible for them to establish or resume a healthy relationship with their children. In Bonner or Boundary Counties, no ongoing, research-based classes existed. To participate in parenting classes, families drove to Coeur d’Alene or Spokane. Even after driving a long distance, parents might find that classes were not necessarily based on research, but rather on opinion that did not fit with the family’s value system.

Our Response
To meet the needs of parents in Boundary and Bonner Counties, Extension Educators offered a series of six classes in each county. The classes covered topics such as establishing and using natural and logical consequences, child development information, and how to advocate for children.

Cooperators
Community support and collaboration were evident through participation of agencies and organizations including Head Start, Early Head Start, the Department of Health and Welfare, Even Start Family Literacy, and Community Action Agency.

Participation
Participants included parents of children birth to age twelve, grandparents raising grandchildren, and stepparents. Mothers and fathers were nearly equally represented in all sessions. Some parents participated by order of the court, however others joined simply to become a better parents. Opportunities were provided in each class session for all parents to interact and form relationships. These informal social opportunities provided parents with an ongoing support system that they could use outside of class.

Goals and Objectives
Goals of the parent education program included:
• Increase parents’ confidence in their parenting skills
• Increase parents’ understanding of normal child development
• Decrease parents’ use of coercive punishment.

When parents have confidence in their skills they are more likely to respond appropriately to their children. Parents with knowledge of normal child development have more appropriate expectations of their children’s behavior.
Likewise, parents who understand the role of discipline and the effects of punishment are less likely to use coercive, physical punishment and more likely to use more effective discipline strategies such as time out and logical consequences.

**Program Outcomes**

Participant evaluations were collected at the end of the sixth session. Parents completed a retrospective post-test, provided demographic information, and added comments. Comments were overwhelming positive. Results from the retrospective posttest were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum. Participating parents reported increases in all measured areas including:

- A 35% increase in knowledge of how their child is growing and developing
- A 28% increase in knowledge of what behavior is typical for children.
- A 31% increase in confidence in their ability to parent.
- A 41% increase in ability to respond effectively when their child was upset.
- A 40% increase in ability to develop and use logical consequences for their child’s behavior.

Parents were enthusiastic in their support of the parent education program. A comment from one parent sums the support the program received, “Do a lot more of these and let people know about them. I will, too. I want to take it again involving more material.” One mother reported that her husband is so proud of the certificate he earned for completing parenting classes that she is having it framed as a Father’s Day gift.

**The Future**

Parent education will be an integral part of future programming in northern Idaho Extension offices. The Basic Parenting curriculum will be offered on an ongoing basis in both Bonner and Boundary counties. In addition, a series of classes are scheduled for parents of teens, and Parenting Apart will be offered in the near future. Single workshops are planned on topics including sibling rivalry, natural and logical consequences, and parenting in public.

**For More Information**

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