University of Idaho Parents as Teachers
Program Helps Parents and Children

The Situation
Extensive research shows how important the early years are for learning. Neurons in children's brains build interconnections at the most rapid pace in the first three years of life, a process that lays the foundation for children's learning in the years ahead. In 1999, Idaho's Governor Kempthorne launched a "Generation of the Child" initiative, with special interest in ensuring that parents have the knowledge to support development in these important years.

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is a national research-based program developed for parents of children from prenatal to kindergarten entry. PAT engages trained parent educators to help parents develop their skills as their children's first and best teacher. The program includes four components: personal visits to the family, group meetings for families, screening of children for health and developmental concerns, and linking families with community resources.

Our Response
The Governor's Office sought an agency partner to deliver the Parents as Teachers program in communities throughout the state and to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the program's impact on participating families and their communities. From 1999-2007, UI Extension served that role, through the Parents as Teachers Demonstration Project. With the program now closed, we take the opportunity to celebrate its accomplishments.

Parents as Teachers programs were launched in fourteen University of Idaho Extension locations scattered throughout the state. Parents showed a strong commitment to the program, in most cases enrolling before their children were one year old and participating in PAT until their children entered kindergarten. During the seven years of the program, over 1,500 families from 67 Idaho communities participated in PAT at UI Extension sites, including more than 2,500 children. Nearly 16,000 personal visits were conducted with families and 790 group meetings were held for PAT families and others in the community. UI PAT programs "graduated" nearly 400 children to kindergarten in Idaho schools.

This rich parenting program contrasts with the limited offerings otherwise available for young families in Idaho's communities. A University of Idaho survey of program resources showed that, other than PAT, few communities offered parenting education of any sort on a regular basis. Programs were rare for parents of young children—those years so important for development. Options were especially limited in rural areas, and driving distance was a significant obstacle for many families.

UI Parents as Teachers brought a comprehensive parenting education resource to Idaho families in communities of all sizes. PAT is an open program with no income restrictions, but most participating families (62.1%) had incomes under $36,000. The program served many challenged families, including teen (6%) and single parents (10%), and Spanish language (7%) and minority families (14%).

To enrich education through diversity the University of Idaho is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer and educational institution. University of Idaho and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating.
Program Outcomes

Evaluation data show that the University of Idaho’s PAT program had a strong impact on parents and children alike. Parents reported significant gains in knowledge about child development and in their ability to meet the daily needs of their children. They also increased in their confidence in parenting. In addition, they read more to their children, did more activities with them, and were better networked with other families with young children, all behaviors shown by research to be associated with positive outcomes for children.

University of Idaho researchers analyzed the literacy components of the PAT curriculum and found the program to be thoroughly infused with literacy content. Parents learned concepts and activities relevant to all aspects of early literacy, including oral language, visual perceptual skills relevant to reading, word-sound awareness, pre-writing skills, print awareness, and knowledge of the alphabet. Effects of these program components were shown among the participating children. That is, children in the UI Parents as Teachers programs showed strong progress in their pre-reading skills while in PAT, and outscored non-PAT children on reading readiness as they approached kindergarten entry.

All thirteen UI Extension PAT programs were full to capacity, and most had sizeable waiting lists of additional families who hoped to participate. These impact data show that parents were drawn to the program for good reason. The benefits of PAT were shown for parent and child alike.

Parent comments show the many ways Parents as Teachers helped families:

“Parents as Teachers program has helped me through some of the most difficult times of my children’s lives…I will truly miss it.” (Gooding County)

“There’s a huge influence of PAT that can’t be measured—it’s like a pebble in a pond. I’ve shared what you taught me with other parents—the ripple effect.” (Nez Perce County)

“PAT has helped my family a great deal by diagnosing impairment in speech and where to go with a new deaf child. This program will be greatly missed.” (Gooding County)

“PAT prepared my child to feel comfortable with a teacher. I feel it is first the parents’ responsibility to be involved with their child’s education.” (Ada County)

“PAT has made me more aware of the importance of spending time with and reading to my child.” (Jefferson County)

“PAT is great because a parent educator visits at a time convenient to your family and you talk about your child and you learn so much.” (Ada County)

Many thanks to our Parents as Teachers educators for their commitment to these Idaho families: Candi Kelly, Sharon Tonnemacher, Alicia Robertson, Julie Thaete, Ann Ahernsdon, Becky Allen, Gloria Stout, Suzy Wookley, Anna Schwartz, Monica Sturm, Rosanna Campbell, Juanita Hernandez, Olga Quintera, Pam Curry, Shawa Moreno, Michelle Hansen, Michelle Welsh, Marguarita Castallanos, Tasha Clinton and Jo Anne O’Dwyer. Thanks also to the UI Extension offices that hosted PAT programs and to the Extension county faculty who served as supervisors, including Lorie Dye, Linette Riley, Shelley Thorpe, Diana Christensen, Cindy Kinder, Barb Abo, Kathee Tifft, Sue Traver, Valdasue Steele, and Carol Hampton. Additional thanks to Diane Demarest, Program Director, Janica Hardin, Data Manager and to Harriet Shaklee, Family Development Specialist.

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