

What Works in Parenting Programs for Parents of Young Children Living with Multiple Stressors

Getting Participants to Sign Up for Your Program

Even if a program is well designed, with good, evidence-based content, it can still fail to show positive results because of the way it has been implemented. To make a worthwhile program truly effective, you need to pay attention to process variables, like recruitment, retention, engagement, maintenance and ongoing support, as well as to the content of the program you offer.

The first challenge to implementing a parenting program for parents of young children living in situations where they face multiple stressors is **getting people to come**. When parents answer surveys, many say they are interested in parent education. However, the percentage shrinks when it comes to actually registering for such programs, especially among populations whose lives are complicated by other factors.

Here are some suggestions from the literature about valued and promising practices related to recruitment:¹

- Do a **needs assessment** to understand the needs of the parents you are serving. A good fit between program and participants will increase program effectiveness. Since families' needs differ, you also need to clarify your program's goals so that you can refer participants to the appropriate place, either your own program or the services of other organizations. In addition, it helps to be aware of how ready participants are to accept new parenting behaviours. This will allow you to adapt the program to their degree of openness, wherever they are in the change process.
- Offer a **range of programs**. One size does not fit all. If one program does not appeal to a parent, another one may. By offering choice, you honour the diversity of interests and learning styles of adults.
- Organize programs by **age of children and parenting topics**. Adults are motivated to learn things that they can use right away in their daily life. Parents will be most attracted to a group that focuses on the current ages of their children. Topics related to particular behaviours (e.g., tantrums) or to transition points (e.g., school entry) will also be most likely to motivate registration.
- Plan **advertising** carefully, keeping in mind potential participants' interests, language and literacy skills. Effective advertising piques people's curiosity, makes the subject sound relevant to them personally and offers enticements for attendance. In small communities and some ethnic groups, word of mouth from former participants is more effective than posters and flyers. The recommendation of respected community leaders (elders, school principals, religious leaders) can also play a big role in the success of a program.
- **Personal contact** works. Experience has shown that personal contact frequently tips the balance when parents are hesitating to sign up for a program. Some people report that they have recruited fathers by going to specific environments (workplace, recreational areas, the barber shop, etc.). Others have raised fathers' interest in project activities by asking them to offer services, such as handyman skills.
- **Persistence** pays off. You can reduce "no-shows" at the first meeting of a program by making a phone call or sending a note to remind participants of meeting times. Follow-up phone calls also provide an opportunity to clarify parent expectations and reduce anxiety, other factors that lead to higher participation.

¹This is the first in a series of five documents which summarize practices that have proven most effective when working with parents of young children living in circumstances with multiple challenges. Complete references for all the suggestions here are provided in the document *What Works for Whom? Promising Practices in Parent Education* by Betsy Mann, published by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada). To view *What Works for Whom?*, as well as the other four summaries, go to www.frp.ca.

- Potential participants are more likely to sign up for a program if they have at least **met the facilitator** beforehand. They can take the opportunity to ask questions in person about any concerns they have. You can offer reassurance to help overcome any apprehensions that would prevent them from registering.
- Offer the program at a **convenient time and place** for participants. Single, unemployed parents with low income and low education levels are generally more flexible about the time of the day of a program than two-parent, employed families who prefer evenings or Saturdays. You still need to check to make sure the time fits with children's routines and transportation schedules. Try to locate your program where participants can get to it easily, with minimal travel time.
- Consider the right **length for your program**. Since people do not change attitudes and beliefs easily, programs need to last long enough to have an effect. Studies show that most proven prevention programs are intensive and are provided over a relatively long period, sometimes years, especially in the case of families who have complex problems and multiple challenges. On the other hand, parents generally hesitate to commit themselves to a program that lasts more than six to eight weeks. In some situations, even eight weeks duration is a barrier to participation. You need to know the habits of your potential participants to strike the balance between effectiveness and acceptability of the program's duration.
- **Reduce potential barriers**. Programs for parents in challenging circumstances often offer child care and assistance with transportation, to make it as easy as possible for people to attend. Multi-cultural interpretation may be necessary for parents if language is an issue.
- Offer **incentives**. Programs frequently use snacks and meals as a drawing card. Some also offer prizes. In some large-scale American programs, parent assistants receive payment for their participation.
- Choose a **non-threatening environment**. Adults tend to learn better in settings in which they feel comfortable, both physically and emotionally. Since anxiety interferes with being open to new information, the environment needs to be non-threatening in the eyes of the participants. You need to look at your location through the eyes of potential participants. Families may have had negative experiences in their dealings with social service agencies. Better results are generally achieved when activities take place in familiar settings where people already live, work, study and meet.
- Publicity for the program should be **non-stigmatizing**. People are unlikely to register for a program if they think it is only for parents with problems. For instance, "preparation for school" is a neutral way to describe the topic of a parenting program; it is an umbrella big enough to cover a wide range of parenting skills and knowledge.

"Parents feel empowered when accessing services they need without feeling 'labeled' as ineffective for doing so. Parents who attend 'non-traditional' parent programs (such as creative or physical activity programs for adults) are more likely to be open to reflect on their parenting challenges than parents who are referred to these services because of specific childrearing concerns."

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

- Encourage **referrals** from other community organizations by informing your community partners about the nature of the parenting programs you offer.
- Offer a **"taster" session**. If parents are unfamiliar with the facilitator, the location or the concept of parenting education, they may be willing to come to a drop-in information session or a one-time workshop. If they are thinking about making changes in their parenting, such a session may be enough to move them to take action.

