

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

Helping Participants to Engage and Learn

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.

Once participants are registered and coming to your program, simple attendance is not enough. Participants need to be *actively* engaged in the learning process for a program to be effective. Here are some suggestions, particularly from the adult education literature, on **how to engage parents** of young children living in situations where they face multiple stressors:¹

- Continue to implement **mutual goal setting** and ask participants for **feedback** on whether the program is meeting their needs. In this way, you continue to support a sense of ownership and self-efficacy. You are also continuously checking that your choice of content fits with participants' immediate concerns. Adults learn best what they need to know and what they can put to immediate use.
- Set participants up for **early success**. You can encourage parents who have feelings of low self-efficacy and low self-esteem by organizing your program so that participants experience early success in areas that are important to them. For instance, you could start by offering—and asking participants to share—simple, **practical tips** that make life with children easier.
- scientific research results, another may prefer to participate in a discussion about personal experiences. There is some evidence that people's ethnic backgrounds influence their preferred methods of presentation. It is important to suit the methods to the participants and offer a variety of options.
- Use methods that appeal to a **variety of learning styles**. Considerable research in the field of adult education has demonstrated that people have different styles of both taking in and processing information. You can engage participants by using many avenues to present information, including activities, role plays and videos.
- Another factor that influences participants' engagement in a program is their level of **readiness to change** their parenting habits. You will be more successful if you adjust your material to this readiness level. If you rush into teaching new skills before participants feel the desire to make changes, they may disengage from the process.
- Ensure that written materials suit the **literacy level** of participants. Studies have found that 42% of the adult population in Canada has difficulty extracting meaning from written text of medium complexity. It will be hard for participants to fully engage in a program if they have difficulty reading the documents you provide.
- Maintain a **learning climate** that is comfortable for your participants. Your task may be complicated by the fact that what makes one parent feel comfortable could cause discomfort for another. One person may want to listen to a lecture about

“Doing weekly ‘success stories’ helped some participants to acknowledge that they do actually have many successes in a week, and that they made them happen, rather than always focusing on the problems we face.”

FRP Canada survey of parenting group facilitators, 2006

¹This is the third 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.

- Use **pictures and videos** that portray people whom participants can identify with. If they see skills being modelled by people that they think are like themselves, they are more likely to consider those skills as applicable to their own situation and more likely to try them out at home. It is also important that these images be of professional quality, since people will compare them to what they see on TV.
- **Have fun** and keep it lively. A fun atmosphere appeals to everyone, but it may be especially important for young parents and for families who might not have much access to entertainment. The learning atmosphere should not feel like a classroom.
- To be able to engage in learning, people need to feel comfortable, not defensive and isolated. Participants will be more engaged if you have the **personal qualities** to build a relationship with them. The personal qualities associated with family-centred relational practices include empathy, warmth, caring, and commitment. Furthermore, to adhere to the principles of participatory practice, you will need humility, respect for differences, and the ability to share power and build a sense of partnership with participants. Some studies show that when it comes to effectiveness, facilitators' ability to form constructive relationships generally matters more than their personal attributes, such as gender, age and ethnicity. Nonetheless, in minority communities, many organizations prefer to hire a facilitator from the same cultural group or with similar life experiences as participants, as a way to establish rapport more quickly.
- Make sure that you keep up to date with **knowledge in relevant areas**. In order to make informed choices, parents need to trust that the information you give them is current and reliable. Among other areas, you will need to stay informed about child development, child guidance, nutrition, safety, problem-solving techniques and community resources. Knowledge of other subjects may be required, depending on the topics raised by parents. You will also find that knowledge about family systems, family stress and group process will support you in your work.
- Ensure that you have the **required skills** to work with the parents in your program. There is a continuum of levels of intervention with families that goes from simply disseminating information to individualized therapy. Parenting programs can be situated midway on this continuum. At this level of intervention, facilitators should have advanced group facilitation skills that follow learner-centred principles. Consider that participants who have had unsuccessful experiences in school are likely to be uncomfortable in situations that remind them of the classroom. Overly didactic and instructional methods may cause them to revert to disruptive behaviour or to drop out.
- Take advantage of **ongoing training**. Facilitators require frequent opportunities to keep their knowledge up to date and to hone their facilitation skills. One study found that mentoring of facilitators gave the best results.
- Look for adequate **support and supervision**. Primary prevention programs have the most impact when facilitators receive good support. Even experienced facilitators need time for preparation, since each group is different. Some authors mention the benefits of regular supportive supervision: encouragement of reflective practice, including awareness of principles and theories; quality assurance to ensure that adherence to program goals is maintained when adjustments are made; opportunities to increase collaboration; and a clearer awareness of boundaries for front line practitioners. Working with parents who face multiple challenges can be exhausting; you need an opportunity to debrief and obtain additional resources when required. You need to be able to set boundaries and take care of your own needs. In particular, you need to be able to refer parents whose situation demands more intensive interventions to secondary prevention programs or to individual counselling. In addition to making services more effective for participants, such support, along with adequate pay, will reduce staff turnover. Stability in personnel is essential to maintain the trusting and collaborative personal relationships that are the foundation of work with parents living with multiple challenges.