



Parenting programs: What makes them effective?



NSW Department of
Community Services

Introduction

This Research to Practice Note has been developed to provide a snapshot of parenting programs and assist caseworkers, and other operational and policy staff, in assessing and referring clients to parenting programs. Due to the variations in the nature and availability of parenting programs across the State, staff will need to check what is available in their local area.

Definitions:

Parenting is a term used to “capture the focused and differentiated relationship that a young child has with the adult (or adults) who is (are) most emotionally invested in and consistently available to him or her”¹.

Parenting programs are focused short-term interventions aimed at helping parents improve their relationship with their child, and preventing or treating a range of problems including behavioural and emotional adjustment². Programs can be offered on a group or an individual basis.

What is effective parenting?

The most recent research on effective parenting has moved away from a focus on parenting “styles” (such as permissive, authoritarian and authoritative) to looking at the purpose of parenting and the skills parents need to fulfil that purpose. Parenting is seen as assisting in the socialisation of children into their context, and for this to occur parents need to be *adaptable*. There are three main themes to adaptability: *perceptiveness* (the ability to see what’s happening around the child, including the impact of the parent’s behaviour), *responsiveness* (the extent to which parents connect with their children, including their ability to be sensitive to the child, express warmth and affection and adjust their behaviour based on the child’s needs) and *flexibility* (the ability to respond in different ways according to the demands of specific situations, including having a range of responses)³.

Categories of parenting programs

Effective parenting programs help parents develop skills in perceptiveness, responsiveness and flexibility. Parenting programs can be divided into two broad categories: relationship focussed approaches and behaviourist approaches.

- *Relationship focussed approaches* use techniques like active listening, understanding and acceptance of a child’s feelings. Parents are encouraged to use natural and logical consequences to control children’s behaviour. Examples of parenting programs using this approach are: Systematic Training in Effective Parenting (STEP), Parent Effectiveness Training (PET), TIPS (Tips and Ideas on Parenting Skills) and most parent discussion groups.
- *Behavioural approaches* are based on observable child behaviour and the environmental circumstances that maintain behaviour patterns. Behavioural programs use specific techniques to reinforce desirable behaviour and control undesirable behaviour in their children. Examples of parenting programs using this approach are Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) and the Incredible Years.

Behavioural approaches are more likely to have been tested under study conditions than relationship focussed approaches.

A review on programs for parents with three to 10 year olds found that:

- group-based parent training programs that adopted a behavioural approach were effective in improving behavioural problems in children
- relationship focussed programs were also effective in improving children’s behaviour, although to a lesser extent
- community-based group parent training programs may produce better changes and be more cost effective and ‘user friendly’ than individual clinic-based programs⁴.

Key issues in parenting programs

What can parenting programs offer parents?

Parenting programs aim to help parents in the following ways:

- develop knowledge and strategies to build positive behaviours in children and promote positive family relationships
- develop knowledge about appropriate ways to manage misbehaviour
- develop a sense of parenting self efficacy (which is linked to more positive parenting outcomes – see box).

What is parenting self efficacy?

Parenting self efficacy refers to a parent's:

- knowledge of appropriate child care responses to particular situations (for example: how to detect and relieve distress of an infant; how to establish and set limits for three year olds)
- confidence in their ability to deal with these situations
- belief that children will respond based on the parent's behaviour toward them
- family and friends will be supportive of their efforts⁵.

Self efficacy is associated with parents' efforts to educate themselves about parenting by attending parent education programs and reading literature relevant to parenting.

How do you recruit and retain participants in parenting programs?

- The key to recruiting parents to positive parenting programs is to assure them that the program will help them to improve skills they already possess.
- No aspect of parent behaviour or family socio-economic status is a clear indication that parents will or will not attend parent workshops, although higher parental educational attainment is predictive of recruitment.
- Universal parenting programs are the most likely strategy to attract a diverse range of parents.

The most important factor in retaining parents in a parenting program is the relationship between parent and facilitator. Behaviour shown to foster this relationship and maintain the participation of parents includes the following⁶:

- empathic responding and listening on the part of the facilitator
- facilitator warmth
- facilitator acceptance of participants
- development of an alliance relationship with parents
- provision of a rationale
- acquisition and practice of new behaviours
- encouragement of risk taking
- cultivation of hope/enhancement of expectations.

What are the characteristics of effective parenting programs?

Effective parenting programs include evidence-based information, strategies that will assist parents to develop their skills, and are based on a variety of adult learning principles. Such programs provide a blend of information presentation, opportunities for questions and discussion, and behaviour skills rehearsal. It is often the opportunity for behavioural rehearsal that is neglected in parenting programs, and this is likely to reduce their effectiveness.

Effective parenting programs have been identified as having several common content characteristics:

- programs are conducted mainly with the parent/s (rather than parent and child) and parents are encouraged to implement the changes at home
- parents learn to identify and monitor behaviour that can be targeted for change
- appropriate behaviours are reinforced and anti-social behaviours are ignored or attract consequences
- the program allows parents to see how to implement techniques, to practice them and to review the behaviour changes at home⁷.

Parenting program effects seem likely to be long term⁸, although 'booster' sessions are important as they increase positive outcomes from parenting programs in the longer term⁹.

Parenting programs

Programs such as Triple P and Incredible Years have evolved over more than 20 years and have developed a range of interventions that have been found to assist parents. Both these programs continue to evolve and develop additional materials for parents.

Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)

The Triple P Positive Parenting Program is a system of family intervention that provides five levels of intervention of increasing intensity. The levels include a universal population media strategy, two levels of brief primary care consultations that address specific problems such as sleep or tantrums and are designed for use in settings such as Early Childhood Centres, Child Care Centres and General Practice; and two more intensive training and family intervention programs for children at risk for more generalised behavioural problems. Versions of Triple P have been developed for specific groups of parents, such as parents of children with disabilities and parents involved with child protection services.

Triple P identifies five key parenting tasks in positive parenting:

- ensuring a safe, engaging (interesting) environment
- creating a positive learning environment and being available to your child
- using assertive discipline
- having realistic expectations of your child
- taking care of yourself as a parent.

A large number of studies are currently being conducted on the implementation of Triple P, with a range of parent groups. A population level trial of Triple P in Perth for all parents of preschool children in a specific, disadvantaged area reduced the level of emotional and behavioural problems¹⁰. Triple P is also being used internationally in a population child abuse prevention trial (North Carolina) and as an extension to home visiting (Glasgow).

The Incredible Years

The Incredible Years: Parents, Teachers, and Children Training Series is a program designed to promote social competence and prevent, reduce and treat aggression and related conduct problems in young children (ages four to eight years). The program contains a number of interventions – parent training, teacher training, and child training programs. The Incredible Years Program is used in the Head Start initiative and has been replicated in an extensive trial in the UK. The Incredible Years Program is being delivered by mental health services in Hobart, the Mid-Western Area Health Service in NSW and Campbelltown.

Both Triple P and the Incredible Years are supported by manuals for both practitioners and parents, video materials and an accredited system of training. Costs associated with such programs tend to be high which has limited their uptake.

TIPS (Tips and Ideas on Parenting Skills) Package

TIPS was developed in New Zealand in consultation with Maori communities to meet the needs of vulnerable and isolated families, and has been well received amongst Maori communities there. The TIPS package is being adapted by NSW Health for use across NSW.

The objectives of the TIPS package are:

- to promote responsible parenting that respects the dignity of the child
- to enhance parents knowledge of effective behaviour modification
- to foster the use of parenting techniques that build self esteem in children
- to share difficulties and facilitate personal awareness and growth in parents
- to build parents' confidence in themselves and to support their attempts at responsible parenting.

The TIPS program includes:

- an emphasis on communication skills, as, for example, helping children to deal with their feelings
- relationship building strategies, as in the use of praise and encouraging co-operation
- the use of scenarios, often presented in the form of cartoons, of common family situations, on which role plays are based to generate alternative ways of dealing with issues
- simple summaries of key points for parents¹¹.

The importance of the relationship with the facilitator

The quality of the relationship between the carer and the facilitator may be more significant in changing parent behaviour and improving outcomes for children than the content of the programs themselves¹². Programs which focus on the 'positive' such as parenting skills and children's activities and avoid making parents feel singled out as 'bad parents' are more successful¹³. Parenting programs offered on a general population basis are proving effective in reducing behavioural problems in young children.

Further reading

- *Prevention and Early Intervention Literature Review*, NSW Department of Community Services, 2004. Copies are available on DoCS' intranet and internet – www.community.nsw.gov.au
- *Triple P Positive Parenting Program* – www.triplep.net/ & www.pfsc.uq.edu.au/02_ppp/ppp.html
Triple P is a system of easy to implement, proven parenting solutions that helps solve current parenting problems and prevents future problems before they arise.
- *The Incredible Years* – www.incredibleyears.com/
The Incredible Years are research-based, proven effective programs for reducing children's aggression and behavior problems and increasing social competence at home and at school.
- *DoCS' Parenting website* – www.parenting.nsw.gov.au

Endnotes*

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* Additional references available on request.

The DoCS Research to Practice program aims to promote and inform evidence-based policy and practice in community services.

Produced by

Centre for Parenting and Research
NSW Department of Community Services
4-6 Cavill Avenue
Ashfield NSW 2131
02 9716 2222

www.community.nsw.gov.au
researchtopractice@community.nsw.gov.au

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