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"Looking Under the Hood" of Parenting Education Programs

We check reviews of cars and car seats before we buy, right? Well, getting evaluations of parent education programs before choosing one is just as important. What should parenting education practitioners and parents look for in a program?

Parenting programs fall into two general categories: risk-prevention and health-promotion; most programs have aspects of both. Some prevention-focused programs unintentionally reinforce the stigma that participants are somehow deficient in their parenting. As important as it is to prevent harm, especially harm to children, health-promotion approaches set a higher bar by focusing on capacity-building and overall wellbeing for parents. These programs accomplish prevention goals while appealing to a broader audience. Driver education is for everyone; shouldn't parenting education be as well?

Questions that will help you ascertain the quality and effectiveness of a program include these:

What research has been done on the program? Two terms are used in answering this question. An evidence-informed program or practice is based on accepted principles of child and adult development but [the program itself] has not been extensively researched. An evidence-based program has been tested, proven effective, and is replicated in various settings. [Evidence-informed programs may be as effective as evidence-based programs; they have not (yet) been evaluated in the same way.]

A program will be considered emerging, promising, supported, or well supported

depending on how thorough or lengthy the research on it has been. Evaluations are, of necessity, fixed in time, and new programs emerge every year. Innovation is important for the vitality of any field. Without the automobile industry pioneers of a hundred years ago we would be discussing the latest horse-drawn carriages instead of comparing car safety ratings.

What agency or research institution studied the program? Evaluations that are kept current include the university-maintained Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development and the Federal government-maintained National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP), part of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). It is important to remember that research by a program on its own work may be biased. You can also ask to look at a program's logic model, a schema describing the problem the program addresses, then, in turn: its inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact.

What qualifications and/or experience are expected of presenters and what training and supervision do they receive? Program validity and presenter competence are two different issues. I have heard it said that a participant's experience in a program with a competent presenter and an un-rated curriculum may be better than that in a program with a top-rated curriculum and an ineffective presenter. It makes sense to ask about a facilitator's credentials, how long she or he has been leading groups and whether comments from previous participants are available.

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Visit the PAC on the FRIENDS website at www.friendsnrc.org

Congratulations to the FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council for 10 years of excellent service and commitment!

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“Looking Under the Hood” of Parenting Education Programs

How is parent engagement incorporated into the program?

All programs say they promote parent engagement, but it is not just one thing. Discussions on the topic at the 2011 FRIENDS Network meeting in Virginia inspired this “parent participation ladder”

<http://www.parentsforum.org/parent-participation-ladder> that has five steps: participation, involvement, engagement, empowerment and, finally, leadership.

What opportunities does the program provide for peer support?

This may be the most critical element. Adults, like children, learn best in the context of caring relationships and no one can give what they do not have. When parents learn to better support each other, each individual has clearer insights and more energy for their day-to-day parenting.

Finally, how does the program take into account the

importance of “un-learning”?

How have our childhood experiences affected both the parenting and the parenting education work that we do? The unconscious attitudes and misapprehensions we all carry within us can keep us from becoming the best parents or parenting educators we can be. Such issues may go beyond psycho-social education and require therapeutic intervention. A solid curriculum will make its applicability clear and a competent presenter will acknowledge the limits of his or her expertise and, as appropriate, will recommend other professional support.

In summary, before you “drive off the lot” with your shiny new parenting program, consider the above questions and perhaps a few others: What is the program’s focus? For whom was it created? Does it have a gender bias, or a cultural or sectarian one?

In addition to asking questions about both curriculum and program facilitators, I urge you to discuss with colleagues and friends what their experiences have been in giving and getting help with family life issues. Participating in a program with a friend or co-parent will build peer support into the experience and multiply its benefits for you and, ultimately, for your own and other participants’ children.

Submitted by Eve Sullivan, founder of Parents Forum and author of *Where the Heart Listens*, available in print, ebook and audiobook (see her profile at www.encore.org/story/eve-sullivan).

Parents Forum has 25 years of favorable participant comments but has not yet been studied. We welcome comments on this article and inquiries from prospective researchers and study hosts at info@parentsforum.org. ✉

Why Evidence-Based Fatherhood Programs are Important for Dads

Depending on where you look, the term evidence-based can have slightly different meanings. Generally speaking, however, it refers to a program that has been found by independent research to affect a change in program participants compared to similar individuals who did not participate in the program. Researchers refer to program participants as the “intervention group” while referring to non-participants as the “control group”. A program becomes evidence-based when this rigorous approach to evaluating it has shown the change is not likely due to chance but to the

impact of the program.

Using an evidence-based designation is important for service providers (e.g. using one makes it easier to compete for funding). It’s also important for dads to know why they should participate in one. Here are two of the primary reasons.

1. Trust in the program. A dad can be more certain that the program is going to deliver on its promises. For example, [24/7 Dad®](#), an evidence-based program from the National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI), increases dads’ fathering knowledge and improves their

fathering attitudes and skills. As a result of the rigorous evaluation of this program, dads who attend the program sessions and apply the lessons they learn can trust that it will help them be better dads and find hope for their own situation as a result.

2. Improved family relationships.

A dad can be more certain that the program will help him improve the relationships he has with his children and, possibly, the mother of his children. For example, the co-parenting relationship between dads who participate in 24/7 Dad® and the

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Parent and Pediatric Conference

On April 12, 2016, The Family Tree in partnership with Maryland Family Network, and The American Academy of Pediatrics hosted the 1st Annual Parent and Pediatrician Conference. It was a full day event held in Baltimore City with parents in attendance from the Baltimore metropolitan area. Conference offerings included plenary sessions on TREE (Talk, Read, Engage, Encourage—a developmental approach for parents to interact with their children), the use of Circle of Security Shark Music, and Managing Challenging Behaviors with Young Children. Other conference offerings included a panel presentation by parents.

They shared their positive experiences with receiving support services from area agencies for their children and themselves with suggestions and recommendations for parents in the audience needing the same. In addition to the above, vendors whose mission is to serve young families were on-site. They disseminated resource materials to parents about their organizations well as answered parents' pertinent questions regarding health and family life. A featured offering at the conference included a demonstration on mindfulness practice. The conference culminated with a Mother Goose on the Loose demonstration. Parents and their children together were engaged in this fun and interactive activity.

The goal of the conference was to provide an opportunity for learning and sharing by both parents and their professional counterparts with a specific focus on the needs of parents. Parents were involved in the planning of the conference as well as included as active participants



The parent panel presentation.

throughout the event. Free on-site childcare and lunch were provided to enable families to attend. The responses from conference participants were positive. At the close of the conference, planners, including parents shared sentiments to make this an annual event.

Submitted by Melanie Martin,
Program Consultant
Maryland Family Network, Inc.✉



Items were raffled off to attendees.

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Why Evidence-Based Fatherhood Programs are Important for Dads

mothers of their children improves. Incarcerated fathers who participate in another NFI program called [InsideOut Dad®](#) increase contact with their children while in prison.

Service providers shouldn't be the only people on the look out for evidence-based programs. Dads should be equally motivated to seek out these programs and know that the time

they invest will produce healthier relationships with their children and families.

Submitted by Erik Vecere, Vice President of Program Support at the National Fatherhood Initiative®. He is currently a member of the FRIENDS National Advisory Council.



Talk, Sing, Read, Write and Play Together

“What can be done to give children a strong foundation in the earliest years of life, upon which everything else will be built?” This is a question that has been occupying many people and organizations.

A study from 1995 by Betty Hart and Todd Risley concluded that children’s vocabulary skills are linked to their economic status. Researchers recorded interactions for 2 ½ years in homes of families from all economic levels. Children from high income homes heard an average of 45 million words, children from working class homes heard 26 million words, and children from families living at or near the poverty level only heard 13 million words. The gaps in word knowledge were already apparent by the time a child was 18 months old.

Research has shown that children who enter kindergarten with large vocabularies do better in school than children with limited vocabularies. Children who enter kindergarten “ready to learn” have higher rates of graduation from high school, get better jobs with higher salaries, have more success with long-term relationships, and have lower rates of incarceration.

A more recent study done at Stanford University measured the language processing skills of 18- and 24- month old toddlers. These children were placed on their parents’ laps, facing a screen with two photographs projected onto it, for instance, one photo of a dog, the other of a baby. A voice questions, “Where is the baby? Can you see it?” The child’s eye movements are tracked to see whether or not



Mother Goose on the Loose

the child looks at the baby. The time it takes for the child to move his or her eyes towards the baby’s photo once the question has been asked is also measured.

The results from this study reinforced Hart and Risley’s findings that children from lower income homes lagged behind children from higher economic backgrounds in vocabulary development. Since research has proven that vocabulary development in the early years of life affects reading skills and general success in school, the playing field can be leveled if we work on building the vocabularies of all children.

The good news is that the problem of inequality of words can be remedied! No matter what the economic status, the native language, or the education level of parents, there are five things parents can do with their children to help prepare them for school and increase their vocabulary. These five practices, highlighted

through the [Every Child Ready to Read®](#) program, are: **Talk, Sing, Read, Write, and Play**, adapted to fit the ages of the children.

Although computer games and toys may claim to be educational, children’s brains respond best to interaction with another human being. By **talking** to their children in whatever language is easiest, parents build their child’s vocabulary. Because of this, many literacy organizations have begun telling parents to talk to their children. Since songs often include descriptive words that might not be used in ordinary speech, **singing together** is another way to build vocabulary.

Although most children under age five cannot yet read, they are able to look at illustrations in books and answer questions like, “What sound does the cow make?” Younger children who cannot yet speak can often point to the kitty when asked, “Where is the kitty?” Toddlers may not

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Talk, Sing, Read, Write and Play Together

have the attention span to sit through an entire book being read aloud, but they may enjoy hearing the first few pages of a story. Sharing books together whether by reading aloud, describing pictures, asking questions, or telling a story while looking at the illustrations is a great way to introduce children to books while building vocabulary. These are all good ways to **read** to young children. And if families do not have books in their homes, by visiting the local public library they can attend free story times, look at books, play with toys (yes, most public libraries now have early literacy corners with toys and games!), and borrow books for free!

Fine motor skills are not developed enough for infants and most toddlers to be able to write letters and words. However, exercising the fingers that will be holding pens and pencils in later years helps children develop the motor skills needed for learning how to write. Doing fingerplays, such as "The Itsy Bitsy Spider", are perfect for helping very young children build their **writing** skills. Playing percussion instruments and grasping flannel board pieces are also ways to build fine motor skills.

Play is the work of childhood. Through play, children explore the universe; they learn to express themselves, learn to share, to communicate, to solve problems, and to try new things. In play, it is impossible to make a mistake. And, during play, vocabulary words are used in a wide variety of ways.

When Dr. Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist from Texas, began working with imprisoned mass-murders, he discovered that they all had one thing in common: a

Lovely, downloadable posters promoting the five practices (talk, sing, read, write, play) in English and Spanish, produced by the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) can be found at: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/babiesneedwords>

lifelong lack of play! Further study showed that play leads to positive socialization; during play children learn how to cope in difficult situations without violence, and they learn how to "say it with words, not with fists." Play enables children to test alternatives and experience joy. After more research, Dr. Brown concluded that joyful play experiences in childhood can reduce violent acts as an adult.

If we want our society to be a place where all children have the ability to do well in school and be successful in life, we can share these practices with all parents. . . TALK, SING, READ, WRITE and PLAY with your child. That is all it takes! No fancy toys, flash cards, or workbooks are needed.

The most important factor, however, is the interaction between the child and the important adult in that child's life. Talking, singing, and looking at books alone does not have near as much value as interaction with a loved adult. And it is never too late to talk, sing, read, write, and play with your child, even if he or she is well beyond kindergarten.

One word of caution, however. Talking at a child is not the same as talking with a child. Children engage in conversation if it is about something that is

interesting and meaningful to them. It is not just about saying words, it is also about having a relationship and exchanging words.

By Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen, Executive Director, Mother Goose on the Loose, LLC, Baltimore, MD, <http://www.mgol.org> <http://www.linkedin.com/in/betsydc>

OPAT (Oklahoma Parents as Teachers) is a free home visitation program for parents and children who live in Putnam City. Through it, MGOL is being offered at more than 50 elementary schools in Oklahoma City, and parents with children from birth to age 5 are being served.



Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen



Parent Advisory Council Activities and Conversations about Evidence-Based Programs and Practices

The child abuse prevention community, like many others, has focused on evidence-based and evidence-informed programs and practices (EBPs) for more than a decade. Funders, program coordinators, and other stakeholders have been asking, where is the evidence that a given program is effective? But where do parents, the consumers of services, fit in this relatively new direction, where "evidence-based" may be part of the title for advertised programs?

When families enroll in a program, they come with a myriad of feelings, from discomfort and anxiety about what they are getting into, to excitement about learning something new and meeting other parents. But their deepest desire, most often, is to leave the program with new skills, good information, and better relationships among their family members. They too might ask, where is the evidence that this program or service will have the impact on me and my family that I desire?

The FRIENDS' Parent Advisory Council (PAC) has been discussing this aspect of EBPs the past several months. Check-out their article in this edition on what evidence-based and evidence-informed may mean to consumers of prevention services, as well as articles written by program developers and others. These write-ups offer considerations for parents considering enrollment in a program including questions to ask providers and themselves.

The CBCAP Annual Grantee's Meeting will be held August 30th in Washington, D.C. in conjunction

with the National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN). FRIENDS' Parent Advisory Council members will be well-represented with about half of the Council attending the one-day meeting. These members will also hold a half-day planning meeting on Monday, August 29th, and will attend the CBCAP Meet and Greet that evening. We hope most CBCAP State Leads will arrive in D.C. in time to join the PAC, Federal Project Officers from the Children's Bureau and FRIENDS staff at the Meet and Greet which begins at 5:30 at the Grand Hyatt.

You will find photos of the PAC

members on the FRIENDS' website. <http://friendsnrc.org/parent-leadership/parent-advisory-committee-sub-link-from-about-us>. Find out who they are and seek them out during our time together in August. If your experience with them is like mine, you will learn something interesting and new! You may want to exchange ideas regarding EBPs versus emerging programs, and parent/consumer interests.

And a BIG congratulations to our PAC for ten years of service!

by Valerie Spiva-Collins
Director, FRIENDS National Center



FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council members (from l to r): Dawn Patzer, Jill Gentry, Sam Fuhmann, Eliza Cooper, Jessica Diel, and Sam Blue. (Not pictured: Fatima Galinda Gonzalez, Art Hernandez and Brook Hoffbauer)

About the PAC

FRIENDS has established a Parent Advisory Council to provide useful overall program direction and guidance to the activities of the National Center. Committee members share their experience and expertise in child abuse prevention and family strengthening through their active participation in FRIENDS workgroups and the annual Grantee's meeting, development/review of FRIENDS written materials, and by providing resource center staff with consultation and advice.

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