

July 2016

Parenting Matters

Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8

Parents are among the most important people in the lives of young children. From birth, children rely on mothers and fathers and other caregivers in the parenting role to care for them and to chart a course that promotes their overall well-being. While parents generally are filled with anticipation about their children's unfolding personalities, many lack information and tools to support them in their parenting role and promote their children's healthy development.

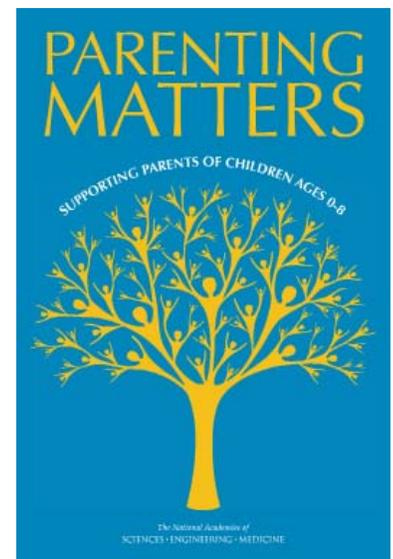
Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8 (2016), a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, reviews research on parenting practices and identifies effective practices. The report also recommends ways agencies and others can support interventions that help more parents learn about effective parenting practices.

EFFECTIVE PARENTING PRACTICES

Research shows that parents who know more about child development are more likely to have quality interactions with their child and to act in ways that support their child's healthy development. And parents with knowledge of specific evidence-based parenting practices are more likely to engage in those practices.

Parenting practices that the committee found to be associated with positive child outcomes in areas of physical health and safety and many kinds of competence—emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social—include

- contingent responsiveness (“serve and return”)—adult behavior that occurs immediately in response to a child's behavior and that is related to the child's focus of attention, such as a parent smiling back at a child;
- showing warmth and sensitivity;
- routines and reduced household chaos;
- shared book reading and talking to children;
- practices that promote children's health and safety—in particular, receipt of prenatal care, breastfeeding, vaccination, ensuring children's adequate nutrition and physical activity, monitoring, and household/vehicle safety; and
- use of appropriate (less-harsh) discipline.



INTERVENTIONS TO SUPPORT PARENTING

A number of interventions exist that promote effective parenting practices. These include formal sources of parenting support, such as well-child care, center-based child care—for example, Head Start and Early Head Start—and home visiting programs, most of which use a preventive approach. Other interventions are targeted to specific populations of parents, such as parents of children who have developmental disabilities and parents facing adversities, such as mental illness, substance abuse, and intimate partner violence. Federal efforts also support families—primarily those with low incomes—through income assistance, nutrition assistance, health care, and housing programs.

SCALING EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

Many families who could benefit from programs that promote effective parenting neither seek out nor are referred to them. Referral mechanisms should be improved in order to better support parents and their children. Millions of parents interact with health care, education, and other community services each year. Leveraging the services with which parents already have ongoing connections as points of intervention and referral would help improve the reach of effective strategies.

Recommendation 1: *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Education, state and local agencies, and community-based organizations responsible for the implementation of services that reach large numbers of families (e.g., health care, early care and education, community programs) should form a working group to identify points in the delivery of these services at which evidence-based strategies for supporting parents can be implemented, and referral of parents to needed resources can be enhanced.*

Currently, research on how to bring effective parenting programs to scale is limited. Additional evidence is needed to create a system that can efficiently disseminate evidence-based programs and services to the field, ensure that communities learn about them, assess whether they fit with community needs and make needed adaptations, and monitor fidelity and progress toward targeted outcomes.

Recommendation 2: *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Institute of Education Sciences, the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute, and private philanthropies should fund research focused on developing guidance for policy makers and program administrators and managers on how to scale effective parenting programs as widely and rapidly as possible.*

ENHANCING THE WORKFORCE'S ABILITY TO DELIVER EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Evidence-based parenting interventions often are not available as part of either routine services for parents or services, such as treatments for mental illness and substance abuse, not designed specifically for parents but with the potential to benefit many parents. One reason for this is that providers of these services often lack knowledge and competencies in evidence-based parenting interventions. Graduate training for providers of children's services and behavioral health care (e.g., in schools of social work and nursing) currently includes limited or no coursework on evidence-based parenting programs or their core elements.

Recommendation 3: *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should continue to promote the use of evidence-based parenting interventions. In so doing, it should support research designed to further operationalize the common elements of effective parenting interventions, and to compare the benefits of interventions based on the*

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

The committee identified features and practices of parenting interventions that appear to increase parents' use of effective parenting practices and promote parents' participation and retention in programs and services. No single approach will yield the same positive results for all parents. But the committee found several elements of program engagement and support to be successful across a wide range of programs and services:

- Viewing parents as equal partners in determining the types of services that would most benefit them and their children
- Tailoring interventions to meet the specific needs of families
- Integrating services and collaborating to support families with multiple service needs
- Creating opportunities for parents to receive support from peers to increase engagement, reduce stigma, and increase the sense of connection to other parents with similar circumstances
- Addressing trauma, which affects a high percentage of individuals in some communities and can interfere with parenting and healthy child development
- Making programs culturally relevant to improve program effectiveness and participation across diverse families
- Enhancing efforts to involve fathers, who are underrepresented in parenting research

common elements of effective parenting programs with the specific evidence-based programs from which the elements originated.

INCREASING PARENTS' ENGAGEMENT

Parents' engagement in young children's learning is associated with improvements in children's literacy, behavior, and socioemotional well-being. Parent engagement is a process that can be facilitated by provider skills in communication and joint decision making with diverse families about their children's education. However, programs that prepare individuals to work with young children do not always include evidence-informed strategies for creating successful partnerships with families. Moreover, there is limited official guidance on how to increase parent engagement.

Recommendation 4: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education should convene a group of experts in teaching and research and representatives of relevant practice organizations and research associations to review and improve professional development for providers who work with families of young children across sectors (e.g., education, child welfare, health). Professional development should be evaluated as to whether its core elements include best practices in engagement of and joint decision making with parents, including those in diverse families.

Recommendation 5: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education should convene experts in parent engagement to create a toolbox of evidence-informed engagement and joint decision-making models, programs, and practices for implementation in early education settings.

COMMUNICATING EVIDENCE-BASED PARENTING INFORMATION

Parents can benefit from having information on developmental milestones for children and parenting practices associated with healthy child development. When designed and executed carefully in accordance with rigorous scientific evidence, public health campaigns are a potentially effective low-cost way to reach large groups of parents. Moreover, information and communication technologies now offer promising opportunities to tailor information to the needs of parents based on their background and social circumstances.

Recommendation 6: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education,

working with state and local departments of health and education and private partners, including businesses and employers, should lead an effort to expand and improve the communication to parents of up-to-date information on children's developmental milestones and parenting practices associated with healthy child development. This effort should place particular emphasis on communication to subpopulations that are often underserved, such as immigrant families; linguistic, racial, and ethnic minorities; families in rural areas; parents of low socioeconomic status; and fathers.

SUPPORTING FURTHER RESEARCH

The report identifies a number of promising interventions that support parenting knowledge, attitudes, and practices for specific groups of parents and children. Further research is needed to understand whether and how these interventions should be scaled up to serve all parents who would benefit from them. The report highlights several additional areas for future research.

Recommendation 7: The secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the secretary of the U.S. Department of Education should launch a national effort to address major gaps in the research-to-practice/practice-to-research pipeline related to parenting.

Recommendation 8: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education, in coordination with private philanthropies, should fund research aimed at evaluating existing interventions that have shown promise with and designing and evaluating new interventions for parents with special needs.

Recommendation 9: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in coordination with the U.S. Department of Education and other relevant federal agencies, private philanthropies and foundations, researchers, and research associations focused on children and families, should increase support for studies that can inform the development and improvement of parenting interventions focused on building parents' capacity to parent both individually and together. Such studies should be designed to identify strategies that can improve fathers' knowledge and use of parenting practices associated with positive child outcomes.

Recommendation 10: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education should launch a multipronged effort to support basic research on parenting and applied research on parenting interventions across diverse populations and family forms.

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For More Information . . . This report in brief was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families (BCYF) based on the report *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8* (2016). The study was sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families; Bezos Family Foundation; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; David and Lucile Packard Foundation; U.S. Department of Education; Foundation for Child Development; Health Resources and Services Administration; Heising-Simons Foundation; and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the BCYF page at <http://nas.edu/parentingmatters>.

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