

An often untapped potential

Helping parents to fulfill their role in the development of children

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Parenting can be defined as “the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social, financial, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood.” [1].

Parenting takes a lot of skill and patience and is constant work and growth. The cognitive potential, social skills, and behavioral functioning a child acquires during the early years are fundamentally dependent on the quality of their interactions with their parents. For instance, a recent study suggests that bad parenting can be passed on to the next generations in the family. The researchers found out that the more unpleasant the parent’s childhood was, the more likely their children’s will be troubled too. [2]

This means parents have a unique role they can’t be replaced at, except when they are orphaned or neglected. As recognized by several UN resolutions, “the family has the primary responsibility for the nurturing and protection of children and that children, for the full and harmonious development of their personality, should grow up in a family environment and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.” [3]

This year’s observance of the International Day of Families focused on the role of families and family-oriented policies in promoting education and overall well-being of their members. In particular, the Day raised awareness of the role of families in promoting early childhood education and lifelong learning opportunities for children and youth.

Consequently, the observance also highlighted the importance of parental education for the welfare of children, as developing parental skills have an often untapped potential to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goal no. 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

Diego Barroso, Director, Family Enrichment Courses Coordination and Expansion at IFFD: ‘Parental education and family well-being’ (presentation at the official observance of the International Day of Families at UN Headquarters in New York, 18 May 2017).

History

Historically, most of the education was the task of parents and the rest of the family. Before the establishment of universal and compulsory education parents were expected to assume full responsibility for the upbringing of their children, including their formal education, which is now the province of the school. It was left to them to decide whether they had their children taught at all. But it is of course recognized that formal education cannot do everything and educational systems are slowly recognizing the importance of parents and co-operation with them as one of the responsibilities of the school.

As formal education is regulated by the State and the borders between both worlds is not only totally clear, different political systems give different practical competences to each one of them.

Present

Most men and women have always aspired to be great parents to their children, but some life circumstances can make this more challenging.

Work and family lives are increasingly influencing each other as both women and men engage in earning as well as caring activities, often reinforced by increasing employment instability and precariousness. [4]

One inconvenience is that most programs that aim to up parenting skills are geared towards mothers. Even though studies show kids whose fathers take an active part in their lives are less disruptive and better adjusted socially, most programs that aim to up parenting skills are geared towards mothers.

While men and women can no longer be said to be living in 'separate spheres', the shift in gender roles has been asymmetric. Virtually everywhere, women have been catching up in the public sphere more than men have been doing so in the private sphere. Female labour market participation has been increasing much more than male participation in housework and child care.

As a result of these uneven changes, women today are often to face 'a double burden' or 'a second shift': after their paid work hours they are expected to take the main responsibilities at home too. This double burden is reflected in the family constellation labelled as the 'dual earner-double burden of women' model. [5]

Overview of Parenting Education

Parent education classes and family support initiatives are growing in popularity. Many schools establish

requirements for parenting/family support programs as a component of their services.

Professionals providing parent education programs and resources include parent educators, teachers, counselors, psychiatrists, ministers, parents, extension personnel, nurses, doctors, law enforcement professionals and social workers.

Preventive Parent education with classes (such as presentations or speeches or a fixed topic) or sessions (discussions about real situations, based on the case method) are also growing in popularity in different countries as a way to help the diversity of families of today, since each family is different from another one. [6]

Schools

Schools are the obvious centers for the next phase in parent education in that all parents have some connection with schools for many years. Relations between home and school, however, leave much to be desired in most countries. It is, of course, impossible for schools not to have some link with parents.

The critics say that teachers have enough to do educating children, they cannot be expected to educate parents as well; or it is argued that teachers, too, have something to learn from parents and that, therefore, it is not a question of parent 'education' but of 'co-operation with parents'. The fact remains, that parents have much to learn about schools and about child development, however, this co-operation parents-teachers is key for children grow up and their success. [7]

State regimes

Parents in some countries – especially in Northern Europe – benefit from family leave policies that grant them paid time off to care for their young children, labor market regulations that shorten their regular working time throughout their children's lives, and public programs that guarantee access to high-quality substitute care during the hours that they spend on the job.

In some countries, public provisions not only grant parents caregiving supports, they also encourage gender equality, by strengthening mothers' labor market attachment and/or allowing and encouraging fathers to spend more (paid) time caregiving at home. Public financing of these programs distributes the costs of childrearing broadly, spreading the burden across family

types, throughout the income distribution, between generations, and among employers.

In other countries – most markedly in the US, where childrearing is viewed in exceptionally private terms – parents are largely left to craft market-based solutions to work/family conflicts.

There is powerful evidence from empirical research indicating that our three core policies – family leave, working time regulation, and early childhood education and care – do in fact shape parent and child outcomes.

In those countries with more generous and more gender-egalitarian policy designs, on average, parents have more time to spend with their children; mothers and fathers divide paid and unpaid work more equally; and children fare better on crucial outcomes. The evidence is overwhelming that policy matters: the life patterns of parents and children are influenced by policy configurations. [8]

Conclusions

- Parents may need to be made more aware of how their interactions with their children influence development. Many people will create families like the family they grew up in. Thus often unhealthy patterns are continued.
- Schools are more effective when parents and the broader community are actively engaged in their children's education. By creating more involvement between the parent and child, we are encouraging more parental involvement and interest in many areas of a child's life. Parents can be encouraged to take the lead in organizing and advocating on behalf of their children. Studies show that children whose parents interact with their teachers and schools receive a better education and are more likely to stay in school and graduate.
- Families need support in order to maintain a healthy status. Families may not always be able to create an atmosphere that contributes to a healthy family. They may need help from outside of the family in order to have a healthy family.
- Families may not have the interpersonal skills in order to have a healthy family. Families may not have adequate communication or coping skills in order to have healthy families.

Recommendations

As a consequence, the following recommendations should be taken into account: [9]

Positive effects of Parental education

Studies of the effectiveness of parenting education show the following positive effects:

- Parent education has been shown to increase parenting skills, reduce parenting stress, and reduce unwanted behavior in children.
- When parent education does work, parents develop a sense that they are capable, have the information they need to be good parents and, therefore, develop improved confidence in their roles as parents.
- Parents have the power to create change. The training approach views the parents as the primary caregivers and managers of the child's environment. Parents are seen as the most important contributors to bringing about long-term change in children.
- Parent education reduces the incidence of child maltreatment. Parent education is an important component in the treatment of parents who abuse or neglect their children.
- Parent education programs teach parents how to reduce the impact of marital conflicts on their children and how to create a non-adversarial post-divorce environment.
- Parent education assists single mothers. A single mother's level of education affects how much money she makes, which is associated directly with her financial strain. Financial strain, in turn, increases levels of depression, which can result in parenting problems. Parenting training for them helps to feel more capable of caring for her children while teaching the value of skills that help in the workplace.
- Parent education assists parents of at-risk children. How a child responds to redirection from a parent depends on what they think about that parent, whether they see their parent as involved in their life, and if they believe that he/she really cares what they are doing. Parent education programs developed for helping parents of at-risk children aim to improve not only child behavioral problems, but also maladaptive interactions within the family. The goal is to teach parents to be more responsive in their parenting. Parents are taught effective commands, non-directive comments, and the importance of praise and affection.

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During the Briefing on 'Families, Education and Well-Being' at the UN Headquarters (18 May 2017).

1. Parent education needs legislative support

Funding sources should be provided for parent education and requirements that parent education and parent involvement programs be included in legislative packages for education, juvenile justice, and protective services should be considered.

2. Parent education should be part of children education

Most children will become parents or be involved with children as adults. Teaching high school students how children develop and helping them develop communication and guidance skills could decrease child abuse and provide more supportive parenting for all children.

3. Resources need to be made available to families

Parents who seek training in how to better raise and guide their children need to have resources available to them. This can be done through schools, churches or other institutions that have an interest in the needs of families. Home-based interventions, in the family's own home, have been shown to be particularly effective.

4. Training needs to be provided to children and adolescents in how to develop a healthy family

Courses in schools emphasizing Family and Consumer Sciences need to be provided in order for children to mature into adults who have the necessary skills to form healthy families.

5. Encompass underlying stressors usually associated with child maltreatment

Although prediction of child maltreatment in families is not possible, certain social factors such as low socioeconomic status, single parent or large families, unemployment, relationship conflict, and adolescent parenting are more common among those known to be involved.

6. Family friendly policies need to be emphasized

It is important both for private industry and government agencies to work together to make sure family friendly policies are both developed and enforced.

[1] *The Blackwell encyclopedia of social work*, Wiley-Blackwell.

[2] Julia Ulber, Katharina Hamann, Michael Tomasello, 'Extrinsic Rewards Diminish Costly Sharing in 3-Year-Olds', *Child Development*, Volume 87, Issue 4, July/August 2016..

[3] *cfr. i. e. A/RES/67/142.*

[4] Livia Sz. Oláh, Rudolf Richter and Irena E. Kotowska, 'The new roles of men and women and implications for families and societies', *F&S Paper Series*, n. 71.

[5] *Ibidem.*

[6] Sharon E. Hirschy, 'What is Parent Education?', University of North Texas.

[7] H. H. Stern, 'Parent Education – An International Survey', *Journal of the Institute of Education*, University of Hull, 1960.

[8] Janet C. Gornick, Marcia K. Meyers, 'Welfare Regimes in Relation to Paid Work and Care', *Revue française des affaires sociales*, 5/2006.

[9] 'What is Parent Education', Office of Family Science Education, Research and Policy, University of North Texas.