

Educating Students For Their Future Role As Parents

Harriet Heath, Ph.D.

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I shook the kid. He wouldn't stop crying. I didn't know what else to do. His crying was driving me nuts.

How often we read in the paper parents using words similar to these to explain why they shook, hit, or whipped a child. The parents felt they had no alternatives

Parents feel they have no alternatives because they have had no opportunities to learn other ways of caring for children. Often these parents were shaken, spanked and even abused. These methods of caring for children are what they know. People today become parents often never having even seen a newborn, much less held one. They become parents with little knowledge about what to expect of a baby or how to care for him.

Why Teach Parenting to Students

Educating students for their future role as parents is a preventive measure. Students learn that there are multiple ways of nurturing a child. You can rock a crying infant, walk with her, sing to her, even go for a drive. You do not need to physically abuse the child. Students studying parenting also learn what to expect of infants. They learn that babies' cries are their expressions of their needs. In addition, students learn that nurturing a child is a twenty-four-hour job seven days a week that they are not ready to undertake. As one student said, "You mean I can't party Friday night?"

This (parenting) is the most important job we have to do as humans and as citizens . . . If we offer classes in auto mechanics and civics, why not parenting? A lot of what happens to children that's bad derives from ignorance . . . Parents go by folklore, or by what they've heard, or by their instincts, all of which can be very wrong.

Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry
Harvard Medical School.

"Should You Need License to be a Parent?"
Parenting, November 1994

Educating for parenting gives students knowledge and skills useful in life whether or not they are parents. Students learn about developmental stages. By observing infants over time, watching videos, and/or reading about child development, students realize how different an infant is from themselves and how people's abilities and understandings change as they grow. Programs encourage students to think about what a one-month-old infant can do and what a six-month-old will be able to do. Participants learn how to satisfy the needs of younger children and to anticipate how to keep the infant safe and entertained. Many education for parenting programs include hands-on experiences such as having infants visit the classroom with their parent, having students work with younger children in the school, and/or having them do service projects at the local day care center. Students learn how to actually anticipate and plan for a younger person's needs and interests. Educating for parenting teaches students how to empathize with and care for others.¹

¹ This process that parents follow is an intense form of the caring process. Caring is helping the other to grow and actualize her or himself."(Milton Mayeroff, 1971 *On Caring*. New York: Harper and Row). The caring process is composed of the steps that help a person effectively care for another.

Traditionally, parenting is a subject that has not been routinely taught. People used to gain knowledge about child development and nurturing children by observing younger siblings being cared for or watching aunts and uncles in the extended family. As families have become smaller or no longer live near each other, these early experiences and the knowledge gained from them, have become limited. Family and Consumer Science (historically Home Economics) teachers include parenting in their curricula, but these courses reach a small fraction of female students and almost no males -- as they are usually taught in high school, seldom recommended to college bound students, and presented in courses focusing on traditionally female interests.

Preparing students for their future role as parents will impact positively on the family support movement. Parenting education and support are a significant component of that movement. Indications are that students who have participated in such classes tend to wait longer before having their first child because they realize the commitment, knowledge, skills, and responsibility required of good parenting. Parent centers will hopefully have to deal with fewer very young parents. Parents, remembering vaguely from that class back in middle school that there is more than one way of nurturing a child, will be more prone to look for alternative methods. Parents, looking for alternative methods, are apt to be open to parenting education programs, making recruitment easier. Parenting education that brings parents into the classroom provides the family support center with an avenue into the schools; giving the center parents an active vital role in the schools often increases the parents' self confidence. Self-confident parents become more active leaders in the community, a goal of the family support movement.

I remember leaving the hospital thinking, "Wait, are they going to let me just walk off with him? I don't know beans about babies! I don't have a license to do this. We're just amateurs."

Anne Tyler
Breathing Lessons

Teaching Parenting

Parenting is taught to students, pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, using various methods and content. It is taught in a range of social institutions including scout clubs, after school programs and religious education, though school settings dominate. All programs have in common the teaching of developmental stages and the importance of providing for infants' needs. They emphasize multiple ways of relating and guiding children. Programs differ in the motivation to produce the program and, consequently, what the program emphasizes. One program may have been funded to prevent child abuse, another to prevent teenage pregnancy. Programs may have been developed to teach ways of relating or to provide opportunities to teach cognitive social skills or basic life skills.

It is important to help children learn as much as possible about parenting to help prevent social problems like premature child bearing, and child neglect and abuse. Now that we know more about brain development in the very young, it is critical that we teach our future parents the important role that parents can play in stimulating and nurturing their children, and in preparing them to reach their full potential in school and in later life.

Edward Zigler, Ph.D.
Sterling Professor of Psychology, Yale University and
Director, Bush Center in Children
Development and Social Policy
Testimony, Connecticut Committee on Children, 1999

One approach that has received wide publicity uses computerized dolls. This program's emphases are on pregnancy prevention and preparation for parenthood. The dolls are programmed to cry at different times including during the night, have different needs when

crying, and record how they are treated. (A computer in the doll keeps a record of its care or mishandling, which is retrieved and analyzed.) Students are responsible for their dolls twenty-four hours a day for a specified period. This program offers students a direct experience of caring for another. Discussions before the experience help prepare the students. After a caregiving experience, students reflect on what they have learned.

Parenting programs use the media. Some rely on videos of children at different stages to teach development. Other videos focus on specific issues such as the importance of touch in development or how to set up an environment that is safe for and interesting to the crawling infant. One program's video uses parenting scenarios as discussion-starters on discipline and self-esteem. Many use workbooks or journals in which students record their personal observations and thoughts. *Programs may involve parents by having students ask them how they were parented, how they felt becoming a parent or how they feel now being one. Homework may raise questions that can also stimulate conversation with parents on related topics.*

With smaller and more isolated families, the opportunities to learn about the joys and responsibilities of parenthood at home have been reduced, and responsibility . . . has shifted primarily to schools . . . The task force recommends a substantial expansion of efforts to educate young people about parenthood. Education about parenthood can begin in elementary school; it should start no later than early adolescence.

Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children
Carnegie Corporation of New York,
April 1994

Another way of teaching parenting, and one that may have the most profound impact on the lives of students, is having parents and infants visit the classroom. Babies are a powerful means of teaching. They are cute and appealing. Students relate to them. Infants grab students' interest. Repeatedly, educators using the programs tell of the disruptive child about whom everyone has warned them. But instead of causing problems during the visits, these children become engrossed. One very disruptive boy amazed his classroom teacher. Not only did he become involved for the first time in a classroom activity, he also made excellent detailed observations of the infant, contributed to the class and beamed with satisfaction when the importance of his contribution was recognized. Schools with high truancy rates report increased attendance on days the parent and infant are coming. Teachers, working with students whose first language is not English, have enthusiastically adapted the teaching of parenting into their work. All people, regardless of their background, know about families, parents and children. The commonality of the content makes for an easier transition to a new language.

Different curricula structure these visits differently. In one program the parents with their infant visit the classroom monthly throughout the school year. The students, in preparation for the visit, consider the age of the infant and what the infant will be able to do, and prepare for how to make the parent and infant as well as the students comfortable. This process of preparing for the visit gives students a realistic experience of caring for others. During the visit the students observe and chart what the infant does and what the parent does to support the infant. By actually observing the parent/infant interaction, students quickly realize the importance of parents in their infant's healthy development. Students ask the parents about their lives and how they have changed since becoming parents. After the visit the students reflect on it by asking themselves if all were comfortable, if their plans had been effective.

By the end of the year the students achieve a vast array of knowledge and insights. They have written a developmental chart of eight or nine months of how the infant has grown and changed.

Included in that chart is a record of what the parents have done to nurture that development. Students spontaneously conclude that parents' nurturing is absolutely imperative to the healthy development of the infant and that nurturing changes as the infant grows. The experiences provided in this program give students direct knowledge about how children grow and develop and what is involved in being a parent. Students participating in this program know at its finish that there is more than one way of guiding a child.

Students, implementing the parent/infant visit in the manner just described, are learning a way of relating to others not commonly taught in American culture. By planning the parent/infant visit and observing how parents nurture their children, students are learning how to care. Caring is knowing, feeling, and acting in the interests of others. The process of caring involves planning for meeting the needs or situation of another, carrying out the plans and then reflecting on the adequacy of the outcome. (The same steps followed in the parent/infant visit described earlier.) Parenting taught this way is teaching students a way of relating to other people.

This teaching of caring is in stark contrast to the emphasis on competition dominant in our culture. Students in American schools are given innumerable opportunities to master how to compete. Who runs the fastest? Who gets the best grade? Whose parents earn the most money? The attitude and skills used in competition are important in our American way of life. However, they do not make for happy marriages or sensitive nurturing parents. Also, when competition becomes too extreme, it can become violent. People need other ways of relating. Ways of teaching parenting can give them an alternative. Students need to know how to care for others, an approach they are learning in some of the parenting programs.

Through teaching parenting by having students plan for the visits of the parents with their infants, this programming has integrated caring into the life of the school. Trainers work with teachers and staff to provide opportunities for caring experiences. Older students plan reading sessions by thinking about what books will interest the younger child, and where they can be comfortable and able to enjoy the reading time. Other students may plan a visit to a community for the elderly. They deal with questions of what will be the older people's special needs and interests. Trainers also work with staff to integrate the caring process into how students relate to each other, how staff relate, and how they relate to parents. Thus, caring is modeled throughout the school. Teaching parenting, teaching children how to care, provides students with a different body of knowledge and set of skills, both of which give them another way of relating not only in the future, but also currently with their peers in the classroom. The school atmosphere created by an emphasis on caring is one that is conducive to students learning and well-being.

An unanticipated outcome of the parent/infant visits is that they bring parents into schools and give them a specific role. Many parents are uncomfortable in schools. Their own experiences may have been stressful. They may now only come into the school when their children are misbehaving or failing. With the parent/infant visit, parents have reasons to be in school that are positive: the parents are taking a teaching role, and they are there as authorities. No one knows that infant as well as they do. All programs using parents have found these visits to be an effective way of involving parents. In some schools, parents, hearing discussions about multiple ways of parenting, have asked for more information about parenting that resulted in a discussion series.

Table 1

PARENTING = PLANNING + DOING + REFLECTING

The following outlines the process parents use and illustrates how the parent/infant visit provides students with an experience of following the process and thus learning the process.

The Parenting Process

The Parent/Infant Visit

Caring persons:

Students:

Are involved.

Become **involved by planning** how to make visit pleasant for everyone.

Plan:

Describe situation using knowledge, observations **and predictions**.

Plan:

Describe the situation by:

- Predicting what the infant would be able to do and what the parent would do for the infant.
- Discussing features of the classroom.

Brainstorm multiple possible ways of dealing with situation.

Brainstorm possible

- ways to conduct the visit.
- ways to arrange classroom for parent/infant visit.

Decide most effective ways by following these guides:

- **Goals** of people involved;
- Their **needs**;
- Their **feelings**; and
- Their **characteristics** including developmental level and temperament pattern.

Decide most effective ways to conduct visit based on:

- **Goals** of wanting a pleasant visit and protecting infant's curiosity;
- Infant's **need** to explore;
- Student's **need** to see;
- **Feelings** of infant if objects were always being grabbed away, and
- **Characteristics**: Fact that infant's desire to explore is typical of that age child.

Decide to put chairs in a "U" shape starting at the wall and put unsafe objects outside of the "U."

Implement plan during situation.

Implement plans during visit.

Reflect on accuracy of predictions and effectiveness of planning.

Reflect about visit:

- Accuracy of predictions about:
What infant was able to do and
What mother had to do for the
infant.
- Effectiveness of their planning:
Could everyone see ?
Was infant safe and happy?

Rather than adding another subject to an already crowded curriculum, in these programs parenting is integrated into other class work. The ability to make detailed observations is part of the science program. The observations can be of human infants. Math problems can deal with child development measures as well as the practicalities of caring for infants. If you have five infants of different weights, what is the average? Or what is cheaper using cotton or disposable diapers? Integrating parenting issues into the regular curriculum makes the more traditional academic curriculum more relevant to the students.

The Idea of Teaching Parenting Is Taking Hold

Increasingly, experts in many fields, as well as parents, government officials, and community leaders, are coming to the conclusion that parenting needs to be taught to all students in our schools. For example, bills to establish courses in parenting education for youth have been introduced in the legislatures of Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Arizona, Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin. New York's Board of Regents recently mandated that all high school students must complete a parenting education requirement before graduating. To implement this mandate, New York's Department of Education wrote a guidebook for teachers. The writers of this article helped prepare supportive materials on the rationale behind parent education as well as lesson plans suggested for teaching it.

Prepare Tomorrow's Parents

To facilitate schools' and communities' efforts to teach parenting to their young people, ten years ago Suzy Garfinkle Chevrier organized Prepare Tomorrow's Parents (PTP). Prepare Tomorrow's Parents educates the public about the importance of parenting preparation for children and teens, and provides guidance and resources for educators and advocates. The information is available through PTP's website (www.preparetomorrowparents.org), toll-free telephone line 1-888-PARENTS, by email to info@preparetomorrowparents.org, as well as through written materials. All of the material we prepared for New York teachers is posted on this web site as well.

A major new resource offered by Prepare Tomorrow's Parents is the 182-page advocacy guide published in the fall of 2002. This book takes interested people through the steps of advocating for, beginning and maintaining a parenting education program for students. The guide documents why parenting education for children and youth is needed both for the well-being of the students and the lives they will live as well as for the welfare of the community. Advocates can use these reasons both for proposal writing and for encouraging program development. The guide presents strategies for getting programs into schools and out-of-school community organizations. The guide includes detailed descriptions of different parenting education curricula, with their evaluations when available. In addition, it briefly reviews related program fields such as conflict resolution and violence and teen pregnancy prevention. The guide includes references of books, videos and other materials. It ends with answers to a list of frequently asked questions of issues that might arise. This guide, with its well-documented evidence, review of current programs and practical suggestions will save much time and effort for anyone wanting to set up a parenting education program for children or teens.

The goals of Prepare Tomorrow's Parents are:

- To encourage responsible parenting by mature, involved and prepared men and women.
- To include parenting education as an essential part of the elementary and secondary school curriculum, as well as in community youth programs.
- To decrease violence in our society by reducing the abuse, neglect and abandonment of children, and by encouraging caring behavior in boys and girls.
- To discourage teen pregnancy.

Prepare Tomorrow's Parents works to:

- Identify and promote programs that provide parenting preparation for children and teens
- Maintain an international clearinghouse of materials for educators and advocates
Provide a toll-free telephone line 1-888-PARENTS and a web site
www.preparetomorrowparents.org for information exchange, referrals and assistance
- Increase public awareness of parenting preparation for young people through the media and in presentations
- Inspire efforts and advise proponents throughout the U.S. and internationally

Summary

The teaching of parenting to elementary, middle, and high school students prepares them for a major adult role most of them will assume. It alerts students to the needs of others, to how infants develop, and to the vital role of parents to their infant's well-being. In addition, teaching parenting gives students an opportunity to learn another way of relating to their peers, an alternative to the competitive mode predominant in our schools and culture. Prepare Tomorrow's Parents offers resources including an extensive guide for schools and community leaders to follow as they implement a parenting program in their communities.

Morality comes from empathy, the ability to understand another person's feelings and to care about how he or she feels. And empathy is developed through nurturing interactions with caregivers and parents . . . Children who don't get this nurturing are likely to be two or three steps behind, no matter how hard we try to help them catch up.

T. Berry Brazelton, M.D.
Professor Emeritus, Harvard Medical School
Stanley Greenspan, M.D.
Clinical Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry,
George Washington University School of Medicine
"Our Window to the Future," in "Your Child"
Newsweek, Special edition (Fall/Winter 2000)

See next page for "Quick-Reference Resource Grid: Parenting Education Programs for Children and Teens."

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Quick-Reference Resource Grid: Parenting Education Programs for Children and Teens

Additional information is available at www.prepareschoolparents.org/resource.htm. This is a partial list. New programs are added on an ongoing basis.

Prepare Tomorrow's Parents	1-888-PARENTS <i>info@preparetomorrowparents.org</i> <i>www.preparetomorrowparents.org</i>	Non-profit organization dedicated to advancing parenting preparation for children and teenagers in schools and community organizations. Provides a network for programs and an international clearinghouse of materials for educators and advocates, including a 182-page guide and 13-minute video.						
Program	Contact Information	Teacher Training and Training Materials Available	Curriculum Materials Available for Specific Grades or Ages	Available in Additional Languages	Adaptable for Special Education	Curriculum Can Be Integrated with Other Subjects	Evaluations Available	Major Educational Focus
Family and Consumer Sciences	American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (professional organization) 703-706-4600 <i>info@aafcs.org</i> <i>www.aafcs.org</i>	Yes. Teachers are licensed by the state. Minimum Bachelor's degree.	Primarily Grades 6 through 12. Some programming for elementary grades.	Some materials available in Spanish.	Yes. Special materials are available.	Yes	Yes, for some programs.	Analyzes the roles and responsibilities of parenting and the physical and emotional factors related to becoming a parent. Evaluates parenting practices that maximize human growth and development and the external support systems that provide services for parents. Classes in child development, family life, child care, as well as parenting. Follows National Standards.
The Baby Think It Over® Program	1-800-830-1416 <i>information@realityworks.com</i> <i>www.realityworks.com</i>	Yes	Grades 6 through 12.	Materials available in Spanish.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Develops understanding of the commitment and responsibility of parenting. Uses a computerized infant simulator that is cared for by the teen.
Dads Make a Difference™	651-603-6312 <i>hayne@csp.edu</i> <i>www.dadsmakeadifference.org</i>	Yes	Grades 7 through 12, through two programs.	None	Yes	Yes, in Health or Family and Consumer Sciences	Yes	Two programs. Younger teen program emphasizes the legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of parents, particularly fathers. Older teens discuss relationships and do life-planning exercises to assess when they will be ready to be parents.
Educating Children for Parenting®	215-496-9780 <i>info@ecparenting.org</i> <i>www.ecparenting.org</i>	Yes. Training is required.	Grades K through 8.	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	Develops understanding of the responsibility to be caring individuals today and nurturing adults tomorrow. Students learn about the responsibilities of parenthood and about a parent's role in development, especially during the first three years of life. Curriculum uses monthly parent-infant classroom visits.
Education for Parenting: Learning How to Care Curriculum	610-649-7037 773-973-7744 <i>Harriet_Heath@hotmail.com</i> <i>caring@rcn.com</i>	Yes. Classroom instructor teaches material.	Grades K through 8 complete. Material for high school program. Programming also available for participants' parents.	Spanish	Yes. Has curriculum for teaching English as a second language.	Yes, suggestions for integrating into math, reading, environmental sciences, and biology	Yes	Gives students experiences in thinking, feeling and acting on behalf of another person's interests, "caring" abilities that are basic to parenting as well as cooperative living. Students practice caring by planning for, implementing and reflecting on monthly parent/infant visits. During the visits they observe parents caring for their infants and developmental patterns.
Nurturing Parenting Programs®	1-800-688-5822 <i>fdr@nurturingparenting.com</i> <i>www.nurturingparenting.com</i>	Yes	Grades K through 12. Programming also available for participants' parents.	Some materials in Spanish.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Grades K through 12 Developing Nurturing Skills®. 7th and 10th grades: focus on nurturing self 8th and 11th grades: focus on nurturing families 9th and 12th grades: focus on nurturing children
Parents Under Construction™	713-400-1155 <i>jpozma@aol.com</i> <i>www.childbuilders.org/primary.html</i>	Yes	Pre-K through 12. Programming also available for participants' parents.	Spanish	Yes	Yes	Yes	Teaches child development, communication skills, nonviolent conflict resolution, and positive discipline techniques that will enable children to build healthy relationships now and strong families in the future.
Roots of Empathy™	1-416-944-3001 <i>mail@rootsofempathy.org</i> <i>www.rootsofempathy.org</i>	Yes. Taught by a certified instructor.	Grades K through 8. Programming also available for participants' parents.	French	Yes	Yes	Yes	Builds parenting capacity in schoolchildren and raises levels of empathy. Curriculum focuses on the monthly visit to a classroom of an infant and his or her parent(s) with a certified Roots of Empathy™ instructor.