

Chapter II: Strategy

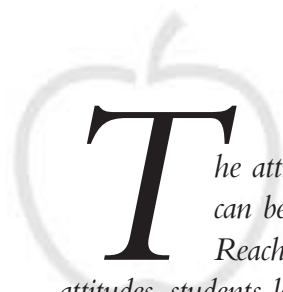
How Does Parenting Education for Children and Teens Address Society's Need for Good Parenting?

One of society's deep seated assumptions is that teaching a skill in school is the best way for a child to learn it. Isn't it strange that the most important and difficult task so many people face—raising children—goes untaught? By making both boys and girls aware of the importance and complexity of childrearing, classes could bring down teenage pregnancy rates, reduce the number of deadbeat dads, and promote caring, responsible mothering and fathering.

Myriam Miedzian, Ph.D.

Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence (New York: Doubleday, 1991)





The attitudes, information, and skills needed for good parenting can be taught to young people through parenting education. Reached at an age when they are forming their values and attitudes, students learn the seriousness of the responsibilities that are involved in parenting (See Appendix A, Summary Guidelines: What Should Parenting Education for Children and Teens Include?)

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.

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton

Professor Emeritus, Harvard Medical School, and

Dr. Stanley Greenspan

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)

Parenting Education Develops Empathy and Caring

Empathy is the ability to understand, be sensitive to, and care about the feelings of others. Parenting education for children and teens places special emphasis on empathy and caring because they are central to a parent's ability to understand and respond to a child's needs. Through secure, empathic, nurturing relationships with caregivers, children learn how to be intimate, to communicate their feelings, to recognize their own wishes, to develop constructive relationships with peers and adults, and to understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Experts also believe that enhancing the traits of empathy and caring is a way to break through patterns of child abuse, neglect, and violence. Psychological research indicates that many juveniles who commit very violent crimes have not developed empathy. Boys, who are bombarded with violent images from sports and entertainment but are less commonly encouraged to express warmth and affection, are at particular risk both for committing violence and for failing to feel comfortable as caring and empathic persons.

Several parenting preparation programs, some starting as early as preschool, foster empathy through discussion and hands-on activities. For example, programs that involve classroom visits with an infant encourage students to understand the baby's needs and to see things from another person's perspective.



Characteristics of empathy, which are first exhibited in infancy and then nurtured as children grow, are enhanced by helping students identify and talk about their own emotions.

Parenting Education Improves Everyday Relationships in and out of the Classroom

By developing students' emotional awareness, empathy, and respect for diversity, parenting education can create a more cooperative classroom environment. As a consequence, students are better able to focus on their academic tasks.

Parenting education includes teaching the personal relationship skills that develop the emotional literacy essential to both good parenting and daily interactions with family and peers. These skills include effective communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

Instruction in nonviolent alternatives in problem solving, for example, helps students sharpen their abilities to communicate their needs and to solve problems without resorting to hitting, threats, or insults. Children learn to get their needs met constructively. Such training is especially valuable for those who might not otherwise have positive role models in their lives. Parenting preparation also provides the impetus for critical self-reflection. Students in dysfunctional family situations can gain some insights into their family dynamics and develop the resiliency and independent thinking to overcome their negative experiences and to make healthier decisions now and in the future.

Some parenting education programs involve classroom visits from an infant and parent. Many teachers have said that the visits draw out individuals who do not generally participate in class and elicit kindness among students who are often mean to classmates. In particular, boys who engage in child care activities in class are reported to exhibit less aggressive and more socially appropriate behavior.

Because of parenting education there has been an increased sensitivity to the needs of infants and others. There has been an increased understanding of dependency upon others for various needs.

Parenting education teacher

Frances M. McKay School, Chicago Public Schools

Parenting Education Develops an Understanding of Child Development and Children's Needs

Good parenting involves an understanding of how children grow, change, and learn. Parenting education underscores children's physical, psychological,



The way a society functions is a reflection of the childrearing practices of that society. Today we reap what we have sown. Despite the well-documented critical nature of early life experiences, we dedicate few resources to this time of life. We do not educate our children about child development, parenting, or the impact of neglect and trauma on children.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, Ph.D.

Research Professor of Child Psychiatry, Baylor College of Medicine, and Chief of Psychiatry, Texas Children's Hospital, and **Dr. John Marcellus**

"The Impact of Abuse and Neglect on the Developing Brain," Scholastic.com (2000)

cognitive, emotional, and social needs and a parent's role in meeting them. By capitalizing on universal student interest in babies and by providing real-life encounters, parenting education informs students about current research on prenatal development and care and the needs of children from infancy through adolescence. Students learn that children of different ages need care tailored to each stage of their development and that unrealistic expectations can hinder a child's development or lead to parental abuse or neglect.

Parenting education teaches prospective parents and caregivers how to create and maintain an early-life environment that is safe, healthy, and stimulating. Students learn about infants' and children's eating habits, hygiene,

nutrition, medical care, sleep routines, and physical fitness and how to recognize their individual needs, temperaments, and feelings. Older students learn about the role of proper nutrition and care during pregnancy, including the avoidance of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, and about appropriate activities for children at different stages of their development.

Educating future parents about consistent, early sensitive care is a key strategy in fostering the positive physical and mental health of future generations. Some researchers point to critical periods in which appropriate stimulation and nurturing must be provided to avoid what otherwise might be irreversible deficits. Early sensitive care is central to the development of empathy, coping skills, resiliency, and self-motivation that can so greatly influence people's emotional well-being and personal success.

Parenting Education Provides Practical Instruction in Childrearing

Well-meaning and loving parents can unintentionally do harm to a child if they are not well informed about human development and infant and child care issues like proper nutrition and constructive discipline, or if they are unaware of safety hazards and potentially negative environmental and social influences. Protecting children from harm is a vital part of an effective caregiver's job.



Future parents and caregivers need to know how to create child-safe environments, especially since accidental injuries are the leading cause of death in young children. Parenting education provides information about Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), poison control, car restraints, and traffic and water safety. In higher grades, students can learn how to select quality child care and to find and assess parenting resources that are consistent with their own values.

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

Parenting education also teaches the awareness, attitudes, and practical skills that future parents and caregivers will need to keep children protected from negative influences. We live in a time when children are bombarded with violent images in the media and are encouraged by advertisers to buy violent games and toys. The typical U.S. child witnesses thousands of murders on television by the time he or she is in high school. During prime time, there are five or six violent acts per hour, and some twenty-five per hour on Saturday morning children's programs. The rate of violence in video games far exceeds that on commercial television. Parenting education provides information about the negative effects of such images and raises awareness about appropriate activities for children, including watching television and movies, listening to music, and using computer games and the Internet.

Students also learn that children need the structure and discipline that enables them to set internal limits and to channel aggression into constructive activities and peaceful problem solving. A critical element of parenting education is exposing students to effective nonviolent disciplinary techniques. Parents who resort to violence or inappropriate punishment often do so because they fail to understand the potentially harmful impact of corporal punishment, lack knowledge of other alternatives, and have unrealistic expectations of their children because of insufficient knowledge about child development. Many follow the patterns of harsh discipline that they experienced in their own childhood.

Students in parenting education programs study the short- and long-term consequences of overly harsh parental discipline. They learn that discipline that emphasizes modeling and effective communications rather than punishment develops healthy and authentic identities, self-esteem, and respect for limits.



I wanted to learn how to discipline a child by not hitting. Every time I was hit as a child, I would always ask myself “Why couldn’t they just talk to me and make me understand?”

Parenting education student
High School of the Humanities,
New York City Board of Education

Parenting Education Teaches Parental Responsibility

Parenting education teaches the obligations involved in raising children. Older students learn the importance of postponing parenting to a time when they are well prepared to meet children's physical, emotional, and financial needs. They learn that good parenting is a worthwhile endeavor that requires time and attention.

Knowing the substantial resources needed for effective parenting, older youth who participate in parenting education programs report that they are more likely to defer becoming parents until they are ready. In programs where before-and-after statistics have been compiled, teen pregnancies declined, sometimes dramatically.

Parenting education programs aim to prepare young men to be emotionally connected, involved fathers. Boys in early grades who practice nurturing skills with infants build confidence in their ability to become committed parents in later life. Understanding the importance of the paternal roles and legal responsibilities, teenage boys are able to make deliberate decisions regarding intended or unintended early fatherhood.

In addition, older students learn about responsibilities of which they otherwise might be unaware, for example, parents' roles as educators of their children or as advisors to counteract negative media or other harmful influences. They learn that they can be advocates for child-friendly policies, including the promotion of institutions that give support to fathers and mothers. By teaching the rigors and rewards of parenting and building critical problem-solving skills, parenting preparation gives young people the tools to make informed, realistic life decisions and provides the foundations for future quality parenting.



Parenting Education Promotes the Mental Health of Future Generations

Parenting education programs act as preventive training, helping to break generational cycles of poor childrearing practices and neglect that create psychologically, and often physically, precarious environments for children. Older students in parenting education programs study the most current information from the field of child development, including the relationship of good parenting practices to a child's psychological development and lifelong mental health.

Helping students learn about functional parent-child relationships characterized by clear communication, nonviolent discipline, and attentive care increases the likelihood that many in the next generation will be buffered from parental behavior that could cause psychological harm. The awareness, knowledge, and skills for effective parenting, presented early enough, can protect both individuals and society from avoidable mental health problems. Further, with knowledge of human development, parents will be more likely to recognize problems as they emerge.

Parenting education can also improve the mental health and resiliency of the current generation by giving students the chance to reflect on their own upbringing in light of what they are learning about the impact of family life on children's development and mental health. Some researchers have identified the

ability to see oneself apart from a dysfunctional family environment as a major characteristic of resilient children growing up in families with mental illness or other kinds of pathology, such as alcoholism or drug addiction. Sensitivity to students' family dynamics on the part of parenting education teachers is essential. (See Chapter VI FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions, How Can Potential Conflicts between Home and School be Mitigated.)

For over twelve years I have implored Governors, legislators, Boards and Directors of Education to implement a "Parenting Curriculum" in the school system. . . . As a Family Court Judge for almost ten years, I cannot count the number of times that children come before me unaware that the physical and/or sexual abuse they were suffering at home was not the norm.

The Honorable Benjamin J. F. Cruz

Chief Justice of Guam

The 1999 State of the Judiciary Address:

A Report to the People of Guam