Chapter V: Advocacy

How to Advocate for and Implement a Parenting Education Program for Children and Teens in Your School or District

Oprah Winfrey: *I'm thinking there needs to be a universal unified teaching system in the schools to teach people how to parent. What do you think of that idea?*

Vice President Al Gore: *I think it's a great idea. I think that parenting education is an idea whose time has come. . . .*

The Oprah Winfrey Show
September 11, 2000

Advocates of parenting education for children and teens come from many walks of life. They might be parents, teachers, administrators, psychologists, professors, corrections officers, attorneys, social workers, protective services workers, welfare personnel, newspaper and TV personalities, local and state policymakers, or other active citizens. In fact, it is usually an enthusiastic local resident who introduces the concept of parenting education, disseminates information about it, and urges schools and youth organizations to implement its principles and practices. Champions of the parenting education movement use a variety of methods and materials in pursuing their cause: printed literature, videotapes, personal and institutional networks, experts' endorsements, local media outlets, and the development of an ever-widening circle of supporters.

> *The importance attached to schooling by parents in terms of their aspirations for their children, their deeply held views about how their children ought to be prepared for society, and the high visibility of the school's program constrains teacher autonomy. There will be conflict between local communities and the professional staff unless the latter takes into account the values and expectations of parents.*
>
> **Judith Schiffer,** Ed.D.
> *School Renewal Through Staff Development*
> (New York: Teachers College Press, 1980)

Advocating for a Parenting Education Program in Your School or District

As an advocate for parenting education, you will need to get support from others. Establishing parent education programs will require several steps, each of which will be shaped by your school system and community and your relationships with them. The following course of action has brought good results for other parenting education advocates.

Do Your Homework

Some of the many things you will need to know before you embark on your campaign are the decision-making and communication structures of your school and district; the relevant state laws, guidelines, and requirements (see Appendix B); facts about your community, such as the incidence of child abuse, school or youth violence, and teen pregnancy; who the key decision-makers and opinion-makers are in the school district and community; whether there are related curricula in the school program, such as child development, conflict

resolution, or character education; the groups and individuals most likely to lend support; and the groups and individuals most likely to oppose parenting education for children and teens.

Frame Your Idea

Begin by setting out your reasons for advocating parenting education for children and teens. Gather information to support those reasons — persuasive articles, statistics, and testimonials. Ascertain how to contact potentially helpful people, including experts in relevant fields. The Internet is an excellent source of such information. Create a one-page handout — a fact sheet or letter about parenting education, that includes your name, phone number, and email address. The Parenting Project's website, *<http://www.parentingproject.org>*, can provide you with national statistics and other information about parenting education. Gather state and local information as well.

Reach Out to Others

Take your information—and all of your persuasive abilities—to a wider audience. If you need help, work with others and share the various tasks. Identify opinion-makers in your community or school, including parents, school administrators, and politicians. Speak with them individually about parenting education. Express your enthusiasm and know your facts. Speak to personal contacts early on, and ask them to refer you to other potential advocates.

Seek local support and endorsement from influential people and groups — writers, editors, public officials, corrections personnel, religious groups, local college and university departments and faculty, professional associations, children's advocacy coalitions, and other educational groups. Schedule short presentations or arrange for a speaker to address staff or parent-teacher gatherings, or meetings of the school board, civic or religious organizations, library forums, women's organizations, or local businesses. Call an informal gathering at your house to view The Parenting Project's videotape (see Selected Resources) or a tape from one of the programs described in Chapters III and IV of this Guide. Arrange to have a spokesperson from The Parenting Project or a community advocate interviewed on a local radio talk show. Look for opportunities that arise as a result of local news items, for example, reports on teenage pregnancy or on juvenile crime or violence.

Refine Your Idea

Once you have gathered a critical mass of support, work with advocates or funders to create a short proposal about the parenting education program you envision, including a budget, a schedule for implementation, and suggested curricula.

Identify potential sources of support for the proposed initiative. Your proposal can then spark further discussion with those in a position to implement the program. Before you send the request, get other supporters' comments and suggestions.

Make Presentations

Making a presentation can be a rewarding experience. Self-confidence and success depend on thorough preparation. You do not have to be a perfect or experienced speaker, but you should do your homework. If you do the following, you will feel secure and will likely receive a welcoming and enthusiastic response from your audience.

For a presentation to an administrator or legislator, carefully research that person's background, concerns, and issues. Know your goals for the meeting, as well as what you think your contact wants to gain from it, and tailor your presentation and materials to his or her particular interests. Forward a one-page generic fact sheet in advance, so you do not waste time introducing yourself, your affiliation, and your goals. If you have already prepared a generic fact sheet, modify it to address the concerns and interests of the person to whom you are presenting. Keep your presentation brief and limited to a handful of important points. Expect "Why, What, Where, When, and How" questions and prepare well-constructed and concise answers. At the end of the meeting, express your appreciation and the hope that you have found a new parenting education enthusiast. Ask about additional individuals or groups you could speak with, and if you might use your contact's name as a source of the referral. Follow up with a thank-you letter and any materials requested. Continue to follow up by emailing or mailing relevant information.

If you are invited to address a group, your talk will be different from a presentation to an individual. Even if you have developed a generic presentation, you will need to modify it for the specific group you are addressing. Tailored to the specific group, your talk might relate to child abuse, school violence or teen pregnancy prevention, depending on the group's interests and priorities. Be clear about the presentation's purpose—whether it is strictly informational or meant to stimulate action on behalf of the proposed project.

Research and remain cognizant of the individual group's general philosophy and the members' varying viewpoints. Address the group's overall interests but focus especially on the leading decision-makers' concerns, and be prepared with cogent arguments to respond to anticipated questions. Know the group's protocols, including the proper way to address people you introduce or mention in your presentation—their titles and their positions in the group's hierarchy. If you organize the presentation with several speakers discussing different aspects of the topic, review participants' speeches and rehearse the whole presentation

for smooth delivery and length, as well as avoidance of repetition. Each speaker should emphasize only one or two points. Begin your presentation by introducing yourself and describing your background and the organization you represent. Then acknowledge and thank your hosts. If you are moderating a panel presentation, introduce each panelist.

Effective speakers make eye contact with people in the audience and appear relaxed and friendly. They speak simply, avoiding jargon, buzzwords, acronyms, and long-winded explanations. They use concrete examples, action verbs, and interesting language, and often use humor and interesting anecdotes. They do not read every word from a prepared text. They often use visual aids — including videos, slides, and charts — to illustrate their message or clarify points.

It is best not to answer questions during a presentation. Tell the audience in advance that they can ask questions at the end, and be sure to leave a quarter of your allotted time for this purpose. For answers you cannot immediately supply, let the inquirers know that you will get back to them, and do so as promptly as possible.

Send a thank-you note to the person who invited you to speak and to any other decision-makers with whom you want to maintain contact. Also, send any requested materials. Finally, review with others how your talk was received so you can improve on the content and delivery the next time you make the presentation.

Get Decision-Makers' Approvals

You will need to identify and get approval from those with the authority to make curriculum decisions. Decisions about new and expanded programs might be made by curriculum committees, school advisory committees, principals, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, the superintendent of schools, the local school board—or some combination of these. Obtain the district's or school's organizational chart, and work with supporters who have access to decision-makers. Talk to the family and consumer sciences or health education teachers and administrators. Investigate prior related curriculum initiatives, such as conflict resolution, abstinence, or sexuality education in order to ascertain how decisions to implement these programs were made and which individuals are likely to support or oppose your efforts. If you are not acquainted with the decision-makers, locate someone who is known and respected by them to make the initial contact or cosign a letter. When you send your letter, include a copy of your fact sheet and proposal. Follow up with a phone call, and arrange a meeting, if possible, where you can make a presentation and address any questions and concerns that arise.

Persist and Follow Through

Getting parenting education adopted in your school, district, community, or state will probably require a sustained effort. Continue to generate support for the idea, using each step to reinforce the next. For example, if you have a speaker scheduled, use a phone tree, email list, or mailing to invite interested individuals to the presentation. Photocopy any local articles about parenting preparation for young people, and send them with a note to community leaders. With luck and hard work, you will convince your community to join those that have already succeeded in including parenting education in their schools' programs.

Finding out What is Happening in Your State[14]

Your department of education is a good place to learn more about existing parenting preparation programs for children and teens in the state. A small number of states require parenting education programs or have considered such requirements. (See Appendix B.) New York, for example, has a parenting education graduation requirement that includes learning standards, while California has a recommended program. In Alabama, by law, students in grades 7 through 12 must receive education in parental responsibilities. In South Carolina, schools are required to provide an instructional unit on family life education in the upper grades. It is also helpful to check the status of other programs related to parenting education in your state (some of these are described in Chapter IV). A growing number of states are requiring or recommending such programs.

Key members and the staffs of state legislatures' education committees are good sources of information on relevant state laws, requirements, and recommendations. They can also help you understand your state's and local area's specific concerns—for example, teen pregnancy rates—which will help you effectively tailor your advocacy efforts.

In all states, family and consumer sciences specialists are excellent resources. Instructors in this discipline often teach parenting, along with family relations, child development, consumer education, institutional management, and many of the courses traditionally associated with home economics. Courses are taught primarily in high schools and sometimes in middle schools. Because parenting is one of seven family and consumer sciences education core National Standards, family and consumer sciences teachers and specialists are familiar with parenting education programming. Every state has a family and consumer sciences specialist within its education system. (See Appendix B for a state-by-state contact list.) Your school district's family and consumer sciences administration might also provide such information. Besides state contacts, state and national

associations of family and consumer sciences teachers and specialists have information about state activities and might provide invaluable assistance.

Another way to learn more about what is going on in your state is to contact some of the parenting education programs described in Chapter III, or the state resources listed in Appendix B. Many have direct contacts within a state or can refer you to a knowledgeable resource person in your community. The Parenting Project's website, <*http://www.parentingproject.org*>, maintains a helpful resource page. You might also do a subject search of the articles archives of your local newspaper.

Understanding How Schools Decide What Parenting Philosophy Should Inform the Curriculum

Curricula decisions frequently are made by committees composed of school officials, teachers, parents, and/or school board members. These decisions often require district approval before and/or after a school committee's decision. Although a parenting education curriculum generally incorporates specific areas of knowledge and skills, the school and school community will decide exactly how they will impart these to the students. For example, one school might decide to include instruction on teen pregnancy prevention as part of the curriculum, while others choose to offer it separately or exclude it altogether. Furthermore, every school and community assesses its own needs and priorities, and formulates a parenting education curriculum by tailoring the available components to its unique setting. Is teen pregnancy growing at an alarming rate in the community? Is school violence a concern? Are young children showing a lack of empathy toward others? These are some of the issues schools and youth programs might wish to address as they shape a parenting preparation curriculum.

Since parenting education deals not only with facts but also with attitudes and values, many parents will consider it important to be involved in decisions about their children's parenting preparation curriculum. Whether or not your school or district includes parents in its curriculum decision process, it is important to apprise parents thoroughly of the planned program implementation and secure their acceptance beforehand. Obtaining the parent association's or other appropriate parent committees' support will help achieve this goal.

As this Guide indicates, there are many approaches to teaching the attitudes, knowledge, and skills essential to effective parenting. Some elements, however, are considered essential to a comprehensive parenting education program from pre-kindergarten through high school. (See Appendix A, Summary Guidelines: What Should Parenting Education for Children and Teens Include?)

Anticipating the Response from Parents, Teachers, Administrators and Others to Parenting Education Programs

Public support for parenting education programs for children and teens is solid, according to public opinion polling conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates for The Parenting Project. (See page 111 for details.) Evaluations of existing programs have been positive, as described in Chapter III.

As expected with any new program, administrators, parents, and teachers will need to weigh competing concerns within the school and community. Chapter VI, FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions addresses many of the common questions that arise. As an advocate, you must anticipate and prepare to handle certain concerns. Be sure to contact people with prior successful experience in advocating parenting education or related programs for children and teens in order to benefit from their experiences. Sound out people in the school system early on to ascertain concerns before you propose a specific program. In this way, your initial plan can address their issues and head off a negative response. You might learn, for example, that administrators feel pressured to teach the three R's, academics, or subjects with implementation standards on which students will be tested. Using the issues discussed in this Guide, brainstorm ways to broaden their perspective or meet their needs through parenting education curricula.

If you anticipate that some parents are likely to be defensive, believing that a parenting preparation program will interfere with their ideas about childrearing, get them on your side by consulting them early to glean their views on childrearing and what they would consider appropriate in a parenting education curriculum. Give them sample curriculum materials that could ease their worries. Seek endorsements from other communities where parents were initially skeptical or from community leaders who are respected by potential opponents.

Find out what other objections might arise. Is the school under pressure financially? Are teachers overextended, and therefore resistant to new curricula? Are parents concerned that a parenting preparation program will engage their children in discussions about sex or in some way encourage them to have children before they are ready? Address the objections in your presentations and proposals. Consolidate all of your thinking in chart form. List the various groups you will need to persuade to establish a parenting education program, their possible objections, and the reassurances you can offer to allay their anxieties and bolster your case.

Public Opinion on Parenting Education for Children and Teens

The vast majority of adults favor parenting education in elementary, middle, and high schools, and no demographic subgroup opposes teaching parenting skills.

Support increases significantly with grade level

	High School	*Middle School*	*Elementary School*
Strongly Favor	70%	51%	41%
Somewhat Favor	18%	31%	28%
TOTAL FAVOR	88%	82%	69%

Women are slightly stronger than men in their support of teaching parenting and relationship skills at all educational levels.

Black and Hispanic responders are slightly more inclined than white participants to strongly favor parenting education at all educational levels.

Single parents are slightly more likely than married parents to strongly favor parenting education.

Lake Snell Perry & Associates conducted this survey for The Parenting Project, using professional interviewers to ask, "Do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose teaching relationship and parenting preparation skills to children in each of the following?" The survey reached one thousand adults nationwide, aged 18 years or older. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. For more detailed results, contact The Parenting Project at 1-888-PARENTS or email info@parentingproject.org.

Using the Local Press and Other Media to Support and Publicize the Need for Parenting Education Programs

Media outlets present powerful tools for building momentum to gain support for parenting education for young people. Media coverage can provide implicit endorsement of your cause and can influence opinion leaders. Find ways to distribute as widely as possible any articles or broadcast stories.

Establish promotional goals at the outset. Identify the audiences you want to reach and the messages you want to convey to them. Create a target media list by evaluating local media as to the publications and radio or television stations likely to reach the target audiences. Think beyond large media outlets, to local talk shows, weekly publications, local magazines, school and organizational newsletters, websites, bulletin boards, community radio, and ethnic or special interest publications. Identify news reporters, writers, columnists, and broadcasters who might be interested in parenting education because they cover schools, communities, young people, families, or societal trends. Organize call-ins when local radio talk shows discuss related issues, and arrange for parenting education spokespersons to appear on local radio and TV issue programs. (The Parenting Project can provide or help you find experts who can be guests on such community talk shows, as well as on news programs.) Take advantage of "photo ops" when something of interest related to parenting education happens in the community. These might become the basis of print or TV news coverage. Media directories in your local library list addresses and telephone and fax numbers. Most media outlets have websites with extensive contact information.

Gather a set of materials for a press kit. Develop a "backgrounder," (a short statement describing your organization's origins and its core group members). Create fact sheets for distribution in your local community or state, illustrating the importance of parenting education for children and teens. Make sure that a contact person and telephone number are listed prominently on all materials. Include relevant articles that you have collected from other media.

Publicize News Events

Local media cover specific events on specific dates—fundraisers, graduations, guest speakers, public votes, introduction of new legislation—that might relate to parenting education for young people. To elicit coverage, mail, fax, or email a press release containing relevant information. Write the release like a news story, to make the reporter's work as easy as possible. Smaller publications might use much of the release verbatim. Several media guides provide excellent samples

of press releases. (See Selected Resources.)

Generally, it is helpful to include a catchy headline and to lead with dates and times of the event. Present the information in the order of importance. Answer key press concerns: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. Make your organization the active voice; for example, use such phrasing as: "The Parent Organization of Lincoln School announced that . . ." instead of the more passive "It was announced by the Parent Organization of Lincoln School." Appeal to television stations with clever phrases that can become "sound bites" or appealing photographic possibilities—a celebrity appearance at a parenting preparation class or a regular parent-baby visit to such a class. Sometimes precede, and always follow up, press releases with a telephone call. If the event was not covered beforehand, revise your press release and submit it with photos for post-event publicity.

Press releases can also announce the progress of your project or comment on the importance of parenting education for young people in light of a current news story. For example, a leader of your state or local effort might issue a statement linking parenting education for young people to the release of a survey about lack of parenting knowledge, or a tragedy related to poor parenting practices.

Seek Features Stories

Features articles, often written in advance and held until space is available, need not be based on a specific event. They are more wide ranging and offer many opportunities to educate readers. Feature writers, if interested in the subject, can make more time for you and place important attention on cutting edge issues.

An "angle" for a feature article gives you an opportunity to remind the media of your program, even when you are not holding an event. Has someone joined your effort who has an unusual background, an interesting story to tell, or a name that is recognizable in your community? Is a site visit to a classroom possible for a reporter? Suggest stories and angles either in a press release or in a letter or email to a writer. Newspapers often have regular columnists who express opinions about community activities. Contact columnists individually, as they might not see press releases that go to other departments.

Express Opinions

There are several ways to get your views into print. Find out a specific publication's guidelines before framing your piece.

Letters to the Editor are one of the most widely read sections of a newspaper and can be strong vehicles to highlight your program. Write direct commentary on a relevant news or feature story, mentioning parenting education for children and teens as a positive approach. Be as brief as possible—

three or four tight paragraphs—and send or fax it immediately after the news item appears.

Op-Ed Pieces are "guest columns" of 500 to 800 words that run in many papers on or opposite the editorial page. An op-ed article allows you to present your case in your own words and to publish your name and your organization's title and contact information. Op-eds must be topical, well written, and forceful. Competition for op-ed space is strong, but in many cities, you can call the editorial page editor in advance to gauge whether or not there is interest in your subject or a time when it would be welcome, for example, Mother's or Father's Day, or in response to a news story.

Editorials represent the opinion of the newspaper's editors. Editorial boards of some papers are open to hearing presentations by community members on various aspects of public policy. Write a letter to the editorial board, suggesting that your group would like to make a short presentation. Cultivate a relationship with an editor (or the publisher of a small paper) in order to gain his or her support for such a presentation.

The Parenting Project can provide sample letters to the editor and op-ed pieces.

Build Relationships with the Media

There is no substitute for personal connections with the reporters or editors you hope will cover your topic. Reporters who are unfamiliar with parenting education for young people might be slow to warm to the idea. Think in terms of building long-term relationships rather than one-shot contacts with the media.

Look for chances to meet reporters likely to be interested in your topic. Seek out reporters at public events. Board of education meetings and political rallies offer good opportunities. Seek introductions by friends or through related programs that have received coverage. Follow up by sending your press kit and a personal note. Request informal face-to-face meetings, inviting a reporter to lunch or to a classroom visit. Once you meet a reporter, pass on tips and leads, even on topics indirectly related to yours. If a reporter does write about your program, send a note or an email expressing thanks for the coverage.